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Haunted Woods



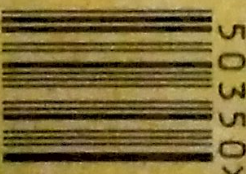
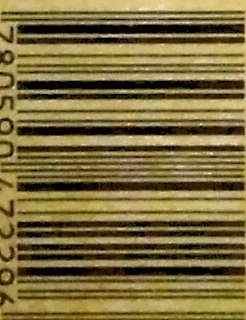
Are they really ghosts?

Bernice Anderson Poole

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Haunted Woods

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*I dedicate this book to my daughters,
Trena, Scarlet, and Sonia.*

1

It was a summer Sunday evening in 1953, in a little country town in the deep South, called Bird Song, North Carolina. We were all sitting laughing and talking on the front porch of Uncle John Duley's brand-new house built on the old haunted Batts place. We four girls: my sister Clara, me Grace Andrews, and our cousins, Anna Lee and Dolly, were squeezed into the old porch swing like sardines in a can. The swing creaked back and forth, and our heads moved in unison. Out at the edge of the woods the birds were singing, and we were happy.

We didn't care if people kept saying the place was haunted, and that they saw the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts, on cloudy days and at dusk, down where the birds were singing. We knew they were probably just saying that because *they* didn't have a brand-new house of their very own.

Uncle John was extremely proud these days, walking around with his shoulders back, because

he and Mr. John Bean were the only Negro sharecroppers in Bird Song to own their own homes. As far back as we could remember, not one single relative in the county had ever owned land or a house.

For over forty years Uncle John had dreamed of his own home. Now living in Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John's house were Uncle Nedro Duley, Uncle John's brother, and his four children, Anna Lee, who was fourteen; Dolly, thirteen; and their two older brothers, Wilson, twenty; and Ned, eighteen. Added of course to **these every summer** were Clara and me. We came down from Raleigh every year the minute school was out, to help harvest, or barn, the tobacco and earn money to buy school clothes for the following year. But each year at the end of tobacco-selling time, after his debts were totaled up, Uncle John never had two dimes to go toward buying land and building a house. It would have been impossible for him if the Batts place hadn't been haunted.

It had begun last summer, just before the tobacco-barning season was over, when it was almost time for Clara and me to leave Anna Lee and Dolly and go back home to Raleigh. We were all sitting at the kitchen table in Uncle John's tenant farmhouse, talking about the big barbecue Uncle John had every year at the end of the barning season. Uncle John suddenly said to Aunt Rainbow, "You know, that old Batts place would

be a good place to build a house." Everybody at the table stared at Uncle John, thinking he'd lost his mind.

The old Batts place was located just up the highway across a wide field. The path that the tobacco trucks traveled led from the highway, past Mr. Tucker the overseer's house, on back through a thin grove of pines, and on to the Batts place.

Before Mr. Tucker, Mr. Batts had been the overseer of the Haynes farm, on which Uncle John had lived and farmed for most of his life. When Mr. Batts grew too old and feeble to oversee the Haynes farm, he bought a piece of land from Mr. Haynes and built a house for himself and his wife.

Then many many years ago, the house burned to the ground. Practically every old person in Bird Song remembered the night the sky was lit up with that house burning and how the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Batts had never been recovered.

Soon after that, young boys sitting on the backs of loaded tobacco trucks, or driving their mules to the tobacco scaffold, began to report seeing old Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts down at the edge of the woods. Over the years the rumor had spread around the countryside that the old Batts place was haunted. And for all those years that land had lain idle. Mr. Haynes couldn't *give* it away.

So that Friday evening of last summer, when Uncle John mentioned building a house on the old Batts place, we were all shocked. But then some-

thing happened: we began to feel happy for Uncle John and agreed with him, all of us finding something good to say about the Batts place.

I remember seeing the lines across Aunt Rainbow's slanted forehead disappear. I thought she probably felt the same as we did — that this was Uncle John's only chance. She smiled at Uncle John.

"They say the water on the old Batts place is sweet and crystal clear."

My cousin Ned said, "Lots of apple and peach trees on that old place. Peaches big as your fist and sweet as sugar."

Uncle John's eyes had lit up. "I know," he said. "This past spring, them snowy dogwoods and magnolias all over that lot looked a beauteous sight."

Uncle John had everybody's attention then. Even Wilson, who never said much, said, "That old pond back there got catfish and bass long as your arm, jumping right out at you."

Uncle Nedro said, "Old man Haynes be so glad to have somebody living on that piece of land again, he'd probably *give* it to you, and pay for most of the material to build the house."

Uncle John jumped right up from the table. "I'm going up there to Mr. Tucker's house and tell him to call Mr. Haynes so I can talk to him about it right now!"

Grabbing his old brown felt hat with the greasy

ring around the band, Uncle John shoved it on his head. And we knew then the deal was on.

And sure enough, here we were, sitting squeezed in the swing Uncle John had hung on the porch of his brand-new house. Now we had the whole summer before us, living here on the old haunted Batts place.

But I didn't know how my life was going to change in the hot months ahead.

2

Now, sitting in the swing at the new house, I said, "It don't make no sense. Look at all the company we used to have at the old house."

Anna Lee said, "Every Saturday and Sunday evening the house and porch and yard was *full* of folks."

Clara added, "And now, nobody comes. It's a shame, folks acting like that because they're scared of ghosts."

"I think it's jealousy," Anna Lee said. "I think people don't come because they're jealous of Uncle John being in this beautiful little house. Just look out there at them big red roses climbing that white picket fence."

While the girls rattled on, I watched Aunt Rainbow sitting talking on the other end of the porch. Her wire-rimmed glasses had slid almost to the end of her freckled nose, the way she always wore them when she was too deep in thought to remember to push them up. She and Uncle John had

no children of their own, but they had raised three sets of children from broken homes in the family.

Aunt Rainbow ran the household with an iron fist, constantly using her pet word, "ass," to describe our back end, as she warned us to get it moving and stop wasting precious time. Those of us living here, including Uncle John, would have sooner jumped into the old bottomless well in the backyard than disobey her. I knew, however, that Aunt Rainbow's strict rules and regulations, her tough laws and orders, were what kept our household running smoothly.

Aunt Rainbow was strict on us girls, which was why Mama didn't mind us spending the summer each year. Mama was strict on us at home, too, more so than Daddy. And Daddy was bad enough. I won't mention how strict Uncle John was, but to give you a good example, he bought Anna Lee and Dolly a combination radio-record player and put it in his and Aunt Rainbow's room, to keep us girls from dancing with boys in the front room . . . even though Dolly and me were thirteen, and Clara and Anna Lee were fourteen.

Now, it was a quiet evening, as all of our evenings had been since Clara and I arrived three weeks ago. The barning season was in full swing. We worked with the same people at the scaffold, except Aunt Twila's daughter, Hazel, who had married and lived in a little house far back in the woods and threw parties every Saturday night.

It was our biggest desire to go to one of Hazel's parties. But that was out of the question with Aunt Rainbow.

Instead, we lived our usual life. We got up with the chickens, Anna Lee and I going to the kitchen with Aunt Rainbow to prepare dinner and supper, Dolly and Clara cleaning the house up. But one thing had changed. We no longer walked to the scaffold because we lived so far back now. Anna Lee drove us ladies back and forth on the wagon and mule. The pet mule named Big Shot had become our main source of travel. Some Saturday and Sunday evenings we four rode down to the general store, about three miles away.

"Seems like Ned and Uncle Nedro are lost without all the company we used to have at the old house," said Clara.

I glanced out across the yard at Uncle Nedro coming up from the pond with a string of fish he had caught.

Aunt Rainbow had her head lowered, peering over her glasses into a Sears & Roebuck catalogue. Her short brown hair was in a ring of curls around her head because it was the weekend. Come Monday morning it would be in the usual three plaits, one swept across her forehead and two in back.

We had been to church with Mr. John Bean's girls, Mable and Roxanne. Then, we'd gone home and eaten dinner and washed up the dishes, and

come out on the porch, still dressed in our Sunday clothes. We wanted to hold on to our weekend spirit as long as possible, for come Monday morning it was right back to a whole week of drudgery. But no company came to help us enjoy our freedom.

Anna Lee stretched and yawned. "The evening's slipping away," she said, cutting an eye across the porch at Aunt Rainbow, lost among the items in the catalogue.

Clara said, "I wish we could go over to Hazel's house. I *know* they're having a good time over there right now."

Anna Lee said under her breath, "Here I am, fourteen years old, and can't even go to a party."

"Me, too," said Clara. "What would it hurt Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John to let us ride over to Hazel's on the mule and wagon and come back before dark?"

Dolly said, "'Cause. They think we'll be with some boys."

Clara said, "We will," and we all fell out laughing, and Aunt Rainbow looked up sharply from the catalogue at us, then went back to her reading.

3

In years past my family had lived on the Gunn farm, which was a few miles up the highway from Aunt Rainbow's house. Daddy and Mama had farmed all their lives. They had five children, Clara, the oldest, me next, and we had three younger brothers then. We were all about two years apart.

One day when I was nine years old, Daddy's brother visited our little four-room tenant farmhouse, and he urged Daddy to move his family to the city, if he wanted his children to get a decent education. Not long after that, Daddy moved us to Raleigh. Daddy was totally aware of the illiteracy among tenant farmers and their children because of the strict rules the landowners had, allowing children to stay out of school to do farm work. The rules had not changed very much down in that area since slavery time.

The day we moved to Raleigh on the back of Mr. Sam's old rickety truck was one of the hap-

piest days of my life. I wouldn't have traded it with heaven.

In Raleigh my Daddy went to work as a janitor at a skating rink, earning less than forty dollars a week. He was a quiet man, until he had a drink. He seldom said much to us children, unless it was to discipline one of us. But he had a good sense of humor, and was always singing funny songs he had heard as a little boy.

Mama was feisty and loved to sing. In the kitchen cooking, or cleaning the house, she would belt out the old hymns she had grown up with, and I would listen and learn the words.

Mama worked at school cafeterias during the school season. Clara and I, after school, had to cook dinner for our three young brothers and the rest of the family.

This was a peaceful and serene time for me. The uneasy school day was over, where I suffered so from shyness, and I was safe in our little apartment. I loved living there but after moving, my memories of the country South only grew sweeter.

Anna Lee and Dolly had always occupied a special place in my heart. I'd always felt sorry for them because their mother left them and went to New York with another man when they were very young. Uncle Nedro took it hard, and for the longest time after she left he grieved over her. Sometimes when he'd been drinking he would cry.

When we lived in the country, we visited each other constantly, taking turns spending Saturday nights with each other. After we moved to Raleigh, Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John took Uncle Nedro and his family to live with them. I felt a deep sense of relief in knowing that Anna Lee and Dolly would now have a mother to care for them.

One of my favorite memories was Aunt Twila, my Mama's sister, entertaining us children on Saturday nights with her ghost stories, making the hair rise on the back of our necks, and making our skin break out in goosebumps. She was so good at it.

I had grown up with a fear of dead people and ghosts, from hearing stories about them as a child, and not only from Aunt Twila, but from many older relatives who loved to tell these stories to one another. If someone close by died, someone was certain to see his or her ghost walking around. The stories had been passed down through generations. I believe these people *thought* they saw real ghosts. Then there were those who just got their kicks from frightening us children.

There was a time when I was much younger that if someone I knew well, or just barely knew, died, I was afraid to go to the kitchen at night by myself. Daddy sensed this fear in me, and always found a reason to send me down the dark hall to get him a glass of water or something, wanting to break my fear. I could manage getting to the

kitchen, but the problem came when I had to turn out the light and get back up that dark, eerie hall. Sometimes I would come bounding out of the kitchen and slap my hand against the wall switch to cut out the light, and I would be halfway up the hall when I realized I had missed the switch. And I would have to go back.

Then there was the time that we roomed with a family when we first went to Raleigh. The old man's son died and the undertaker laid him out right there in the room next to ours, like they did in those days, wine-colored drapes on the wall behind the mousey-gray coffin, little red light shining on the body, and all. Well, the day of the funeral they moved the body out and left the wine-colored drapes right over the telephone table. Everybody but Daddy and Clara and I went to the funeral, and wouldn't you know it. The telephone started ringing its head off. *Ring! Ring! Ring!* I looked at Clara and Clara looked at me, knowing what was coming. "Get in there and answer that phone," said Daddy. We begged and pleaded with Daddy not to send us in that room. But still trying to break our fear of dead people, Daddy stood his ground. I can still feel the goosebumps and my hair standing stiff on my scalp as Clara and I, clinging to each other as if we might be swallowed up by something, walked through that room and answered the phone.

Through the years my fear had gradually set-

tled to the back of my mind. But it wouldn't take much to bring it to the surface again.

"What do you suppose is back in those deep, thick woods?" I asked Anna Lee now.

"Nothing," said Anna Lee. "There's no path through there or nothing. It's owned by a white man, Mr. Samuel HeyJohnny, who lives up North. I don't even think people hunt back in there."

Dolly said, "Probably some big bears and things back in there."

Clara rolled her eyes around at us eerily, and said, "And Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts!"

"Let's go look," Dolly said.

"Are you crazy, girl?" I asked her.

"Come on, Grace. Don't be a scaredy cat," Clara added.

We jumped up off the porch and went down the path leading to the thick woods. It was quite a long distance from the house. But around the bend of the woods stretched a white sandy path, cool from the overhanging trees. And dotted along the edge of those woods were vines of some of the sweetest scuppernong grapes you ever tasted. It was our little get-away place. We'd amble along the path around the woods and talk about life and boys and anything else we didn't want Aunt Rainbow to hear us talking about.

We could sing in perfect harmony, standing with our arms draped over each other's shoulders, our heads close together. We knew all the church

hymns, as well as the popular songs out that year of '53. And we'd stand and sing till our hearts were content. We were walking along singing one of the songs we'd heard our parents sing all our lives. Clara and Anna Lee walking in front of Dolly and me on the narrow path.

Where the green apples grow
Where the grass grows so sweet . . .
Your true love is dead
He wrote you a letter
So turn back your head
Where the green apples grow
Where the grass grows so sweet . . .

Walking along singing, our heads back, our eyes narrowed at the bright blue sky, we were engrossed in the spirit of the song, when suddenly there came from the deep dark woods, Oooo, oooo, oooo.

We stopped dead in our tracks and looked at one another.

"Did you hear *that*?" I asked.

Without waiting to answer one another, we tore out across the field running frantically and didn't stop till we reached the path leading up to the house. We walked up to the porch trying to pretend nothing had happened, all the while gasping for breath.

"What y'all running for, hot as it is?" Ned asked.

He was sitting in a shady spot behind the swing. Everybody was waiting for a logical explanation.

"Nothing," we said, cutting our eyes over at Uncle John. We didn't want him to think we were just like the others. For it would break his heart if he thought we were not as happy as he was living here. So we joined Ned on the other end of the porch, his legs dangling off the porch, his over-all legs rolled up, his skinny legs showing.

Ned knew we hadn't told the truth. He whispered, "What was y'all running for?"

"We heard this noise in the woods like somebody moaning," whispered Anna Lee, and we all agreed, our eyes still wide with fear and wonder.

"Somebody moaning, huh?" whispered Ned. "Won't nobody but Mr. and Mrs. Batts. That's the noise they made when they was burning up."

"Shut up, Ned!" I said. "It won't nothing but a owl."

"Sho won't," said Clara.

Ned lowered his head backwards and rolled his eyes upward and said in a low, eerie voice, "Oooooooo!"

We didn't need Ned to heighten our fear, so we jumped off the porch and left him sitting there laughing at us.

4

Every morning, and the next morning was no exception, around four o'clock, when it was still pitch-dark outside, Aunt Rainbow's voice rose from her bed in the next room, came through the open door, and shook us from our deep and peaceful sleep. "Weeell, I'll get up!" she said, loud enough for us to hear. Each work morning she used this as her cue to wrestle us from sleep, and we had better not even *think* of going back. In a few minutes we would hear her feet hit the floor. The sound of our feet hitting the floor had better come soon after, or else there was trouble.

Since Anna Lee and I were the cooks, helping Aunt Rainbow, we slept together. Dolly and Clara, who were the house cleaners and could lag behind a little in their getting up, slept together.

Some mornings when Aunt Rainbow crowed her message, Anna Lee would whisper to me, "Why don't she go on and get up then, and stop saying it."

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," was Aunt Rainbow's motto. And in no time at all the side meat was frying in the skillet and the coffeepot was gurgling and the dinner pots were rapidly boiling on the back burners. Soon the men, who had gone up to the stable to hitch up their mules, would be coming back for breakfast, and we all would sit down and eat. Then the men would leave for the fields to crop off the tobacco leaves, load them on the tobacco truck the mule was pulling between the rows, and the trucker would bring the truckload of tobacco to the scaffold to us.

I don't know how the word "scaffold" came about, but that was what the place in the barnyards was called, where we handed the bundles of tobacco leaves from the truck to loopers, who tied them on tobacco sticks with twine. The sticks were hung in racks until that evening, when everybody came together and hung the sticks of tobacco in the barn for curing.

Aunt Rainbow was standing at the stove now testing the pot of boiling brown field peas, which we all had shelled the night before. Her long white apron was tied in a neat bow behind her back, and her front plait kind of stuck out to the side, as she lifted up a spoonful of peas from the pot and took a pea from the spoon and squeezed it for doneness.

Anna Lee was mixing a big bowl of cornbread to pat out in the long black baker, and bake into a crispy-on-the-edges, golden pone. Her tongue

was pressing against the corner of her mouth as she squeezed the wet cornmeal through her fingers.

The atmosphere of the kitchen was moist and delicious with smells of breakfast and dinner cooking, and I was churning away at the butter. My main jobs were churning and then preparing the butter for the table, and peeling potatoes.

Each morning Aunt Rainbow set up the porcelain churn that sat on the floor with thick creamy milk. I would pump the long handle with a dasher at the end up and down till I lifted the heavy churn lid and saw lumps of butter swimming in the milk.

The butter had come. I fished out the golden lumps, and ran cold water over it till no more white water came off. Then I put the right amount of salt in, packed it in a mold with a little flower on top, and put it in the refrigerator. When it got cold and was unmolded, it looked pretty on a butter dish, the flower on top.

In the other part of the house, I knew Dolly was busy making the beds and sweeping the floors with the homemade broom Aunt Rainbow had made of straw. And as sure as I was breathing, Clara was sitting someplace behind something, where Aunt Rainbow couldn't see her, sleeping, and Dolly threatening to tell on her.

Anna Lee was now moving about the kitchen like someone fighting a fire, and I was peeling potatoes fast as a machine, yet Aunt Rainbow

said, "Hurry, young'uns. The men'll be here soon."

"Hurry up, Grace," she said, looking back at me and how many potatoes I had peeled. The big pot on the stove was gurgling with seasoning meat and waiting for the truckload of potatoes.

As always, we were dead on time. Breakfast was on the table, and Anna Lee was pulling the big baker of biscuits from the oven, and Clara and Dolly were finished with the housecleaning and coming in the kitchen to wash up, when we heard the thud of the mules' feet against the ground.

Uncle John came rushing in the kitchen with a strange look on his face. "Ginny died last night," he said, looking sadly at Aunt Rainbow. "Mr. Tucker was waiting to tell me when I got to the stable this morning. They called early this morning."

A little red flag shot up in my mind.

Aunt Rainbow's only living sister, Ginny, had been ailing for some time. She lived down toward Rocky Mount. I knew that Aunt Rainbow would be leaving, and with the men at the tobacco scaffold at night, sitting up with the curing tobacco, we four girls would be left there on that old haunted Batts place all alone at night.

"Oh, Lord," Dolly whispered to me and I know she was thinking the same thing. Since we four had seen Aunt Ginny only about twice in our lives, her death wasn't going to bother us so much. But

being there alone at night, on that old haunted Batts place, would certainly be a night we would never forget.

"You girls behave." Aunt Rainbow warned us, "I'll be back in two days." She left us in charge of the house. That evening after work, we said goodbye to Aunt Rainbow sitting on Mr. WD's old black pickup, and the pickup crawled out of sight toward the highway.

We walked back inside stunned. The sun was already going down behind that big scary woods where everybody said the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts emerged from at night, and on rainy evenings, and at dusk.

"We'll beg Ned to stay with us at night," Anna Lee said. "They can spare him at the barn."

We felt ashamed begging Ned to come back and stay with us. It must have hurt Uncle John's feelings, thinking, here we all were in this beautiful little brand-new house, and we were scared to stay in it alone at night.

"Yeah," said Dolly. "Ned'll stay with us."

Clara said, "I thought nobody won't scared of Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts." She looked around at us, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"We ain't," we said.

Dolly said, "That sound we heard coming from the woods that day won't nothing but an old owl."

I said, "Dolly, I've been thinking about that. An owl goes *whoooo*, not *oooooh*."

All four of us knew how to speak correct English. And when we were around those who spoke correctly, we did. But the incorrect English that we had grown up hearing came more natural to us, and when we were alone we let it all hang out.

It was pitch-dark when the men climbed in the wagon and old Big Shot took off across the field toward the scaffold. We had caught Ned behind the wagon where Uncle John couldn't hear and pleaded with him to please come back as soon as he could. And after teasing us with "I'll tell old man Batts and Mrs. Batts not to bother y'all till I get back," he said he would be back as soon as he could.

We rushed back inside and locked all the doors and checked the sticks that Uncle John kept in the windows to lock them. The brand-new television that Uncle John had bought was going to be our savior till Ned came back. It was in Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow's bedroom, and Uncle John only played it when certain programs came on, mostly the news and weather.

We were sitting in a semicircle in front of the TV in straight-back, twine-bottomed chairs, trying not to think of anything except the program on, which was a comedy.

Suddenly we heard thunder in the far distance, and looked around at each other.

"Uh-oh," said Dolly. "A storm's coming up!"

We all jumped up, ran to the window, pulled

back the shade, and discovered the sky was dark purple. Just then a zigzagged streak of lightning shot across the sky, and we ducked. We came back and took our seats and tried to absorb ourselves in the program, each one of us hesitating to mention that the storm might keep Ned from coming back, and we would have to be there all night alone.

Suddenly the rain came down so hard it sounded as if it was trying to shatter every window in the house. I got up and began to pace nervously about the floor.

"Ain't nothing to be scared of," said Anna Lee. We all agreed, yet we knew that the long scary night stretched before us like those last few frightening hours must stretch before a man condemned to die in the electric chair. And as scared as we were we would just as soon trade places with the condemned man.

We had consoled ourselves enough to come back and take our seats in front of the TV. Our eyes were glued to the screen and suddenly there came a sound like a big explosion, and the TV blinked off and left us staring wide-eyed at the little white streak dancing on the black screen. The electricity had gone off. The house was pitch-black!

"Oh, my God!" I cried, sitting frozen to my seat, listening to the harsh wind and rain whipping against the window.

"Somebody got to go and light the lamp," said Anna Lee.

"Sho have," Dolly said, and nobody moved.

Anna Lee said, "I'll go in the kitchen and get the lamp. But somebody's got to go with me."

I said, "Come on, Anna Lee, I'll go with you. I'll make my Daddy proud. He'd be ashamed of me if he knew I was still scared of ghosts." I looked around in the dark at Clara. "Clara," I said, "ain't you gonna make Daddy proud of you?"

"No," said Clara.

Anna Lee and I, grasping a handful of each other's clothes, began to grope our way to the kitchen. I had the feeling that any minute we might bump into something that felt soft like a person.

Anna Lee put her hand directly on the lamp, and I found the matches in the old Singer sewing machine drawer under the kitchen window and lit it.

The flame flickered twice, then it threw a dim, eerie light over the kitchen. I shrieked and grabbed Anna Lee's side, making her almost drop the lamp.

"Grace!" said Anna Lee. "What are you doing?"

Holding my stomach as I let out a deep breath, I said, "Uncle John's hat and overalls hanging over there on the nail scared the living daylights out of me! It looked like a man standing there!"

Back in the bedroom we found Clara and Dolly

huddled together, deeply relieved to see the lighted lamp. Anna Lee put the lamp on the dresser, and we pulled our chairs up close to it and sat watching the flame spluttering and trying to go out.

Finally the lamp began to burn brightly, and we settled down and began to talk quietly, till the pounding rain calmed down to a rhythmic pattern.

It had stopped raining and the moon was shining brightly when we dared look down toward the deep woods.

Anna Lee said, "Y'all, that proves one thing. There ain't no ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts. If so we would surely see them now, walking around down there at the edge of them woods."

"Sho would," said Dolly, her face against the windowpane, straining her eyes to see something. "And I don't see one thing."

Suddenly there came from just outside the window, "Oooo, oooo, oooo."

"Oh, no!" said Anna Lee, and all four of us clung to each other.

"Ha, ha, ha," said Ned, as he unlocked the door and walked in. "Scared y'all, didn't I?"

5

Aunt Rainbow came back the next day just before dark. And although she was always rushing us around, it was good to have her back.

It was wash day and we four were busy at work on the back porch and in the backyard. The old washing machine was going full speed with a load of clothes, and Anna Lee and I both were washing a tubful of clothes on the washboard. Out in the yard the two black washpots were boiling white clothes in one and gummy tobacco clothes in the other. Dolly and Clara were feeding wood to the blazing fires under the pots. Aunt Rainbow was walking about giving orders, all the time working.

“You young’uns hurry up. Got to get this washing on the line before it rains. Here, Clara, go get another bucket of water. Dolly, get over here and stir these clothes. Anna Lee, you and Grace stop all that talking up there and run that tub of clothes through the wringer and put yours in.”

Anna Lee and I heard Aunt Rainbow and we

obeyed her orders, but Anna Lee kept talking as we worked, telling me what she had heard Ned telling Wilson one night when she was eavesdropping at the door.

Ned had said that Hazel was having the party of all parties that Saturday night. Everybody would be there.

"I'm going to that party if it's the last thing I do!" whispered Anna Lee.

"And it *will* probably be the last thing you ever do," I said, laughing.

"I don't care," said Anna Lee as she looked at Aunt Rainbow through the corner of her eye. "I ought to be able to go to a party now and then, at least."

Dolly and Clara joined us on the porch, and when they discovered what we were talking about, Clara jumped right in and agreed with Anna Lee.

"We ought to find a way to slip over to that party," said Clara. "What Aunt Rainbow don't know won't hurt her. All our boyfriends will probably be there." She looked at me and Dolly. "Y'all's too."

All four of us knew boys who lived in Wendell. Wendell was not too far up the highway, yet the boys hadn't been down to see us, because we hadn't invited them, afraid of how Uncle John might act. We liked to think of them as "boyfriends," but really they were just friends.

Aunt Rainbow turned and looked at us huddled around the washing machine, and she rattled off another mile-long list of things for us to do. But after following all of Aunt Rainbow's orders, scrubbing the clothes on the washboard, boiling them in the washpots, adding the bluing solution to the white clothes for bleaching, starching the starchables, we strung a wash on the line that anybody in Bird Song would be proud of. The triple clotheslines stretched from the well on the side of the house, down to the corncrib. And Aunt Rainbow demanded that the clothes be hung in order — the white clothes together and the colored clothes together. It was a sight to see all of Uncle John and Uncle Nedro and Ned and Wilson's overalls hanging in a long line. When the wind blew it looked like a line of men dancing.

Next day was a beautiful morning. A great day for the barning season. The sky was bright blue, the sun shooting rays of glittering gold as you looked toward the east. There was a quiet hanging over the countryside that gave me a sense of peace and tranquility.

We were all wearing old cutout shoes made into sandals. Occasionally one of us stopped to kick sand out of our toes. We wore tight jeans and colorful blouses, and ponytails jiggled against our backs.

Old Big Shot had hauled us in the jostling wagon

across the field and through the woods to the scaffold, as she did each morning. As we rounded the first weathered gray barn, our work place came into view. There were several tobacco barns scattered about with lean-to shelters, which we used when it rained or got too hot, and the racks for hanging the sticks of tobacco. All this sat on a slight incline of hard white clay ground.

Everybody was scurrying about and getting things ready for the first truckload of tobacco to come from the fields. We would soon hear it coming, clacking across the highway. This was a sound we hated. It meant work, work, work!

Despite the rush, we found time to talk and sing our favorite spirituals: "Uncloudy Day," "Working on the Building," "I Got a Home in That Rock," and "My Father's Praying Ground." We always brought the old battery-operated, dome-shaped radio from the house and listened to the *Sepia Serenade*, a musical program that played our favorite rock-and-roll tunes. We often had to beat and slap the radio to get it to work, then we'd get out in the yard and dance wildly. Aunt Twila was very comical, and with her overalls rolled up her skinny bowlegs, her behind flat in the baggy pants, she'd do the Charleston.

The summer before, Hazel had worked the tobacco scaffold with us. She was twenty-two, tall and very pretty, with long black hair that hung almost to her hips. She was a quiet girl, talked

with a lisp, and had had lots of boyfriends. Now she was working on another farm, living with her husband in a little white house back behind those deep woods down from Uncle John's little new house.

The rest of our gang was still here working together, including Johnny Mae, Aunt Twila's other daughter, a shade browner than Hazel, with a wiry little body that was too tiny for her headful of thick hair. Like her mother, Johnny Mae was a great believer in ghosts. She loved to join Aunt Twila in her telling of ghost stories. But since we had been living on the old haunted Batts place we hoped Aunt Twila and Johnny Mae would keep their mouths shut about ghosts. All we wanted to hear about was the party, as long as it wasn't mentioned around Aunt Rainbow.

We wore aprons to protect our clothing from the tobacco gum, brownish-green, which built up on our hands. At noon when we quit for dinner, we had to struggle to clean our hands.

I loved it when we all got together first thing in the morning before the truck came. I was far, far removed from the frightening moments at school in Raleigh, when the teacher would call on me to recite, standing in front of the class. The palms of my hands would get all sweaty, and my heart would gallop so wildly it made the collar of my dress tremble.

Ned brought in the truck and immediately we pounced on the mass of green leaves heaped high, sopping wet with morning dew. In a few minutes our palms would look pickled, the skin white and wrinkled from the wetness.

Me and Anna Lee and Clara and Dolly and Johnny Mae ducked under the lean-to shelter to talk privately, the minute we caught up — got one truck out before another one came. We could rest for a minute, eat a snack or talk about private things. Like Hazel's big party.

We sat with our legs dangling from the ledgelike bench under the lean-to shelter, made high off the ground for the men to sleep on when they were curing tobacco at night.

"Y'all can't miss this party," said Johnny Mae, swinging her legs and looking around at us, excitement in her eyes. She was sitting in the middle of us four, her thick braid of hair running down her back. We were all eating candy. "Everybody's gonna be there. Hazel's outdoing herself this time. She and Henry's barbecuing a whole pig right in the backyard. She's ordered a whole truckload of drinks from the drink man. She's got all the latest records and big speakers for the backyard, and the *whole yard* will be the dance floor! Y'all can dance in your boyfriends' arms all you want to."

Anna Lee said, "We going! No doubt about it!"

I said to Johnny Mae, "I don't know how in the

world Anna Lee thinks we can go to that party without Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John finding out."

"Me, neither," said Dolly.

Clara said, "Grace, you and Dolly can just keep your little tails at home. Y'all too young."

"That's right," said Anna Lee. "Maybe y'all's too young to go to a party like that anyway."

I wasn't as young as Anna Lee made me sound. I know a thing or two, and Clara knew I did, too.

Once my older cousin, Sarah Louise, and her boyfriend brought her mother to visit my mother one night. There was another older boy with them. The three sat in the car while Sarah's mother and my mother visited. Sarah Louise called me to the car. Said her boyfriend's friend wanted to talk to me. I talked to him through the back window for a while. Then out of the blue he asked me for a kiss. I refused. He said to Sarah up in the front seat, "Sarah, tell Grace it's all right if she gives me a kiss." Sarah says to him over her shoulder, "She's not a lady if she doesn't." Well, he *was* cute. And I'd never been kissed before. So I let him kiss me. He'd been eating peanuts. Yucko! I jerked away. Then I ran and told Clara.

Now I said, "And what makes y'all think me and Dolly's gonna keep quiet while y'all go? You got to be just as crazy as I think you are."

"We've got to do some serious thinking between now and Saturday," Anna Lee said.

Clara crumpled up her candy wrapper in her fist. "If Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John weren't such prison wardens they would let us go, and we wouldn't have to slip out and do it. It's their fault."

Running the whole situation around in my mind, I said to Anna Lee, "What if Ned and Wilson get to the party before we leave? They could get somebody to cure tobacco in their place, you know."

"Like who?" said Johnny Mae. "Everybody else is gonna be at the party. Too bad they got to work till way late."

"Yeah," said Anna Lee. "If the party starts at four and lasts till midnight, we'll have plenty of time to spend there and get back home before dark." She sat kicking her legs back and forth in deep concentration, her eyes narrowed at the gray dirt below our dangling feet. She looked up, frowning. "There's got to be a way we can get to that party. There's just got to be."

Johnny Mae looked thoughtfully toward the entrance of the shelter where bright sun glared, one eye narrowed. "I know!" she said, her eyes bright with excitement. "Y'all can ask Aunt Rainbow to let you go get something at Mr. Strickland's general store back over there through them woods across from y'all's house. Then you can go to the

party and stay long as you want. Then when you get back home, tell Aunt Rainbow you left the store and went by to visit Aunt Ella." She looked around at us. "Y'all know Aunt Ella been sick a long time. That would be the perfect excuse."

Anna Lee rolled her eyes around at Johnny Mae. "There's just one little ole thing, though."

"What?" asked Johnny Mae.

"Going back through them woods, that's what!" said Anna Lee.

"Yeah," said Clara. "We heard some strange moaning noises the other Sunday when we were down there by the edge of those woods."

"Sho did," said Dolly.

"Sho did," I said. "And it won't no hoot owl, neither."

Johnny Mae looked at us, a delicious glint in her eyes at the hinting of ghosts in those woods, but she didn't fly into her tirade about the ghosts of old Mr. and Mrs. Batts that she got such a big kick out of discussing at every opportunity. She was only interested, for the time being, in helping us get to the party.

She said, "It ain't nothing but lies folks been spreading about ghosts back there. Y'all want to go to the party don't you?"

"Yeah," said Anna Lee. And we said yeah, too.

"Well, through them woods is the only shortcut I know," said Johnny Mae, who got around a lot, and knew every inch of that countryside. "Any-

how, the path only leads through the edge of the woods," she said. "Not through the thick part."

The thought of us going through those dark woods gave me the creeps. It made my scalp prickle and goosebumps break out on my skin, just thinking about it. But I did want to go to that party something awful.

Anna Lee said, "So where does the path let out?" She was looking straight at Johnny Mae, a serious expression on her face.

"You come out right there behind Mr. Strickland's store. You know, to your right is the old swamp, and to your left is the red dirt road leading to Aunt Ella's house."

"Oh, yeah," said Anna Lee. "And that road across from the store leads down to Hazel's house?"

"Yeah," said Johnny Mae. "It won't take y'all long to get there. And you can stay a long time at the party and still get back before sunset."

I heard the tobacco truck wheels clacking across the highway and looked and saw Ned straddling the back of the truck as the mule approached the soft grounds of the barnyard.

"Shoot! Here comes the truck!" I said.

"Darn!" said Anna Lee.

"Double darn!" said Clara.

That night at supper, as we were all sitting at the table eating, Uncle John said out of the clear

blue sky, "It's a shame what's going on around here now. Take Hazel over there," he went on. "Throwing all them wild parties. Any and everybody getting together like that. One of these days something bad's bound to happen at one of those parties. Especially now that corn liquor is flowing so freely around these parts."

All four of us had been kicking each other's feet under the table at Uncle John's every other word. Yet we had kept our eyes in our plates, eating as if we were not much concerned with what he was saying. It seemed as though Uncle John had been somewhere listening to us discussing Hazel's party under the lean-to shelter that day at the scaffold. Although we knew he was in the field with the other men, cropping tobacco.

Before we knew it, it was Saturday morning. All morning we four had been guilt-ridden and uneasy, anticipating our adventure come evening.

Dolly and Clara had swept the rest of the yard, outside the little picket fence, with homemade brushbrooms, leaving beautiful patterns on the white sandy ground like waves in your hair, leaving not a candy wrapper or cigarette butt or a peppermint chewing-gum wrapper. The yard from the well to the corncrib to the garden fence, on out to the dirt road, was immaculate.

Anna Lee and I had done all the ironing, Ned giving us a quarter each for having the creases

extra sharp in his best jeans, which he wore with a starched white shirt and tie to see his girl.

Yes, we had done our Saturday chores extra well this morning, hoping this would atone for the lie we would have to tell Aunt Rainbow in order to get to the party.

When we looked across the field and saw the white panel truck approaching that came every Saturday morning, bringing candy and doughnuts and bananas and cold drinks, our hearts didn't leap for joy like they usually did, because of our uneasiness.

We four were sitting squeezed in the swing now, forcing down the goodies we had bought off the truck with sodas, the swing gently moving to and fro. We had just heard the old clock on the mantel in the house strike two o'clock. There wasn't much time left. We had already done our hair and selected our dresses we would wear to the party, nothing too church-like, else it would tip Aunt Rainbow off. Now we were trying to assuage our guilt by blaming Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John for being too strict on us.

"Ain't nothing but a little ole party," said Anna Lee, "with dancing and good food. That's all. And here we are, got to tell Aunt Rainbow a big lie if we get there."

Clara said, "It's their fault, always thinking somebody's gonna get into trouble."

Anna Lee took a deep breath and said, "All right now, y'all, let's go over our plans one more time before we go to Aunt Rainbow. I'll ask Aunt Rainbow if we can go visit poor Aunt Ella and take her some nice juicy peaches. I won't tell her how long we'll stay at Aunt Ella's house. But we will go there, and we'll leave quick, then head on down to the party, which should be in full swing, everybody there, time we get there."

"Yeah," said Clara, "Aunt Rainbow's been telling us we ought to go see poor Aunt Ella before she dies. I don't see one reason in the world she wouldn't let us go."

Dolly and I, sitting side by side, had been quiet, obviously thinking the same thing. Suppose what people had been saying about the Battses' ghosts emerging from those woods *was* true? Just because we hadn't seen them yet didn't mean they weren't down there, just waiting for wrongdoing girls!

Aunt Rainbow was delighted that we wanted to walk all that long way in the hot sun to Aunt Ella's house and take her some peaches. Soon we were on our way, looking good, Anna Lee lugging a brown paper bag full of juicy ripe peaches.

As we left the front yard, Aunt Rainbow, standing on the porch, called to us, "You young'uns better be back here before dark!"

"We will," we called back, and Anna Lee and Clara snickered.

"Oh, boy, are we gonna have a good time," said Clara, snapping her fingers and swaying her hips.

"I can't wait," said Anna Lee. She looked back at Dolly and me. "Y'all come on, stop walking so slow. The sooner we get there the more time we'll have to be with our boyfriends."

We all began to walk a little faster, and the closer to the dark, awesome-looking woods we got, the faster my heart pounded. We left the truck path and took the narrow path running around the left side of the woods, the side we'd never been on. And according to Johnny Mae, this path we were taking would cut through the edge of the woods and come out behind Mr. Strickland's store.

As we hurried along, I looked back one last time at the house, but it was out of sight. Then as the path eased into the dark woods the air grew cold, like someone had opened the door to Aunt Rainbow's freezer. We got deathly quiet, our eyes glued to the path ahead, which was overgrown with high weeds because it hadn't been used in a long time.

Anna Lee stopped and stood looking down the path at the weeds which had overtaken the path. "Johnny Mae didn't say nobody hadn't been back here in a hundred years," she said.

"Sho didn't," I said, and we moved on.

Clara said, "And look up yonder! The path leads deeper into the woods!"

We stopped and stared ahead, and I had the eerie feeling that something was grabbing at us from behind when we weren't looking. We took off walking again fast as our legs would carry us. Anna Lee was squeezing the bag of peaches in her arm so hard that dark juice spots were appearing on the bag.

Suddenly from the dark woods on our left came, Oooo, oooo, oooo.

We froze in our tracks, clutching one another, not knowing whether to keep going or run back.

With a trembling voice, Anna Lee said, "Y'all keep calm, now. Let's don't run. It was only the wind in the trees."

Swallowing the big lump in my throat, I said, "Anna Lee, the wind ain't blowing."

"Shut up, Grace!" said Clara. "The wind *is* blowing!" She grabbed my arm.

Convincing ourselves it was only the wind, we moved forward, through trees still as death. All I could hear was my heart hammering away.

Then Anna Lee screamed. She froze, pointing down the path ahead.

"Look!" she cried, her voice caught in her throat. We all saw it — the man and lady — *the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts* standing down there on the path waiting for us.

"Lord, have mercy!" cried Clara, and we all grabbed at each other, scrambling about and trying to get our rubbery legs to work. After

bumping into one another and making frenzied sounds, we took off running back toward the entrance of the woods. Anna Lee was in front leading the way, her dress riding above her knees, dropping peaches as she went.

We didn't stop running till we looked and saw the house. We were pouring sweat, our hair was tousled, and our sandals were covered with dust. Anna Lee was still holding on to the bag that had burst and spilled most of the peaches except two or three.

As we approached the yard we saw Aunt Rainbow at the well, drawing a bucket of water. The whole while she poured the water from the well bucket to the house bucket, and fastened the chain on the nail, she was watching us coming.

"What is it? What happened?" She was walking toward us.

"We saw 'em, Aunt Rainbow! We saw 'em!" all four of us cried at the same time.

"Saw who?" asked Aunt Rainbow.

"Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts!" said Anna Lee. She pointed toward the woods. "Aunt Rainbow, we saw 'em standing right on the path where we were headed. Standing right there! Oh, Aunt Rainbow, it was them! It was them, Aunt Rainbow!"

Clara said, "Standing right there! Just as plain as day!"

Dolly was crying. "It was them, Aunt Rainbow! It was them!"

With my arm I wiped away a tear. "Aunt Rainbow, what people been saying is true! It's *true*, Aunt Rainbow!"

Aunt Rainbow stood looking from us to the woods, her hands on her hips, frowning. She suddenly waved us off.

"Ahhhh! Y'all ain't seen nothing. Your minds just full of them lies people been telling!"

"Yes we did see 'em, too," cried Dolly.

"Yes we did! Aunt Rainbow!" cried Clara.

"It's true, Aunt Rainbow!" I said. "We wouldn't lie!"

"Ain't nobody's minds full of nobody's lies!" said Clara. "We know what we saw, Aunt Rainbow!"

We followed Aunt Rainbow back to the well, still trying to convince her, while she got the bucket of water and walked across the backyard toward the kitchen door. All she would say was, "It was just y'all's imagination. Ain't no such thing as ghosts." She walked on in the kitchen with the bucket of water, and we stopped and stood on the back porch, angry with her.

We went back to the front porch and sat in the swing and talked about what we'd seen till Uncle John and Uncle Nedro and Ned and Wilson came up with Mr. WD on his old pickup truck.

We ran out and met the truck before it pulled up in the yard, Uncle John and Uncle Nedro in front with Mr. WD, Ned and Wilson sitting in the back.

All four of us tried to tell Uncle John at the same time. Uncle John listened for a minute, after he got out of the truck, his face solemn, his eyes going from our faces down to the woods.

Then he said, "You young'uns ought to be ashamed of yourselves, saying something like that right here before WD."

Uncle Nedro and Ned and Wilson and Mr. WD were just standing listening, occasionally looking down toward the woods. Uncle John was the only one who kept denying that we had seen the ghosts.

After Mr. WD left, Uncle John waited until he saw Mr. WD's pickup crawling back across the field, before he turned to us sitting in the swing, and said:

"I'll be goldern if y'all don't beat everything! Don't you know that that's all WD wanted? He can't wait to tell everybody around the countryside that John Duley's nieces has even seen the ghosts."

"But we did see them, Uncle John," I cried.

"It's the truth!" Clara added.

Uncle John plopped down in the wooden chair on the opposite end of the porch, pulled his old felt hat off and began fanning himself and ridiculing us.

"You're just like the rest of them! Believing all the lies that's been spread around all these years. And ain't a word of it so. All y'all saw was a woman

and man coming walking on the path just like y'all was. That's all it was."

Then Uncle John really made us feel bad.

"I thought y'all loved it here just as much as I do. I've worked hard on the grass out there," he said, pointing to the carpet of green grass enclosed within the little white picket fence. "And do you know how much work it took on those roses you see out there?" He pointed at the red roses climbing the fence. "It's a dream come true for me."

Uncle John got quiet, looking down toward the woods. I felt bad enough to die and I know the others did, too. But we couldn't help what we had seen with our own eyes.

Uncle John wasn't through rubbing salt in our wounds.

He looked over at us sitting in the swing with our heads lowered. "As far back as I can remember, this mess about seeing ghosts has been in our family. And it ain't nothing but a bunch of ignorance. And I hope you girls will grow up being more intelligent than that." With that, Uncle John bounded up and walked to the screen door and pulled it open with vengeance and strode into the house.

6

Now it was one month since we had spotted Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts in the woods. Uncle John had talked us into believing that what we had seen were real flesh and blood people. It was easier for us to believe this than to go around scared stiff all the time, so we pushed it to the back of our minds. But it was still there like the tough old weed that you pull and pull on, and it breaks off halfway, leaving the root embedded deep in the ground.

So things were kind of back to normal, we four working like the devil through the week, and making ourselves some little fun on weekends.

The peaches were coming off fast, and Aunt Rainbow had made up her mind that "nary a one" would go uncanned. She was in the hot kitchen now, canning the peaches we had gathered and peeled earlier.

We four were sitting wearily on the front porch wishing somebody would come and visit. Uncle

John had been right about Mr. WD; he had spread the word like butter on a hot stove. Poor John Duley's nieces had seen the Battses' ghosts with their own eyes.

"Moving over there on those haunted grounds. Must have been crazy to go over there in the first place."

Everybody warned old John. "Once the spirits have taken over a territory there's no running them out." On and on the gossip went.

Anna Lee and Clara were swinging in the swing, Dolly and I sitting on the bottom porch step, our chins in our hands. All of us were still dressed up from church.

On Saturday night I had straightened Clara and Anna Lee's hair. Anna Lee had straightened mine; Dolly's didn't need straightening, all she had to do was roll it up.

To straighten our hair we heated the straightening comb on the hot stove eye, and we rolled our hair up on long, twisted strips of brown paper bag. It would be a long, miserable night, big lumps of rolled-up hair pressing against our scalps like rocks. But we would endure the pain and suffering in order to have a headful of pretty, shiny curls on Sunday.

While we straightened one another's hair, laughing and giggling, the whole kitchen and some of the other rooms filled with blue smoke. No matter how careful we were, though, we sometimes

touched bare flesh with the hot, sizzling straightening comb. On any Sunday morning you might see us sitting up in church, our shoulders thrown back proudly, looking as pious as we could, displaying our wounds unashamedly.

This particular Sunday we just happened to be unscarred from our hair fixing.

There had been a big to-do at the church today. Last night Aunt Rainbow had sat up till the wee hours of the morning, pedaling away on her old Singer sewing machine, finishing our dresses. The fish-tail dress was in style, and using the same pattern she had made one for each of us out of different colorful floral prints. The dresses had short sleeves, with little ruffles that began on each side of the back bodice and tapered to a vee below the hip.

At church today Anna Lee recited a poem and Clara sang a song without music, tapping her right foot to beat the band and singing along to its rhythm, her foot tapping the floor as if she had no control over it. Dolly and I, too shy to participate, sat in the audience poking fun at both of them as they performed, laughing our heads off.

"Ah shucks! I wish we could go somewhere," said Anna Lee up on the porch behind us. "Day's almost gone and here we sit like a bunch of sad sacks. 'Fo you know it be time to go back to work."

"Sho will," grumbled Clara, thrusting herself forward in the swing and making it creak and

moan. "We ought to be somewhere right now having a good time." She sat looking off in the distance a long minute, then she stopped the swing with one foot and glared at us, her eyes wide with devious excitement. "Y'all know what?" she asked, the three of us staring at her. "We ought to find a way to slip down to the juke joint!" Her eyes danced from Anna Lee's face to Dolly's and mine down on the bottom step as she awaited our response.

"Girl, you done lost your mind!" I said. I'll swear, sometimes Clara acted as if she didn't have a grain of sense in her head. Didn't she know that Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow would scream if they saw us down at that juke joint where wine and beer and bootleg liquor flowed free as water and men and women danced glued together out on the oily plank floor to the velvety voice of some low-down-blues-singer, or hid in the dark booths and smooched!

Anna Lee rolled her eyes around at us. "Ain't such a bad idea at that."

"You gots to be kidding," exclaimed Dolly, a dead serious look in her eyes as she stared at Anna Lee. "Aunt Rainbow skin our little tails like a rabbit."

"Not if she don't know nothing 'bout it, honey," said Clara.

I said, looking around at Dolly, "Them young'uns gone stark raving mad!"

"Madder than a stomped-on hornet!" said Dolly.

Now Clara had definitely aroused our interest.

The juke joint was a little dark hole-in-the-wall place, located back in the woods. It was halfway between the old house where Uncle John used to live and Mr. Strickland's general store, about two miles on down the highway from Mr. Tucker's house, on the right.

Clara's idea had at first sounded farfetched, but the more we thought about it, growing happier and happier with each passing second, the more real it became. So for a long time we sat in ringing silence, wondering if there was actually some way that we could slip down to the juke joint.

Then as if God himself had heard our lonely Sunday afternoon cry and had come to our rescue, Aunt Rainbow came bounding to the door, stuck her head out, and said, "Young'uns. I forgot to tell them men 'fo they left here, but I'm gonna be needing some more canning jars for when we get back here from work tomorrow evening. We got the rest of them peas to do over yonder in that field, and that basket of tomatoes on the back porch, 'fo they rot, and the rest of them butter-beans y'all shelled."

Standing on the porch with her hands on her broad hips, Aunt Rainbow spat a neat little snuff spittle across the white sandy yard and looked around at Anna Lee. "Anna Lee, go hitch up old Big Shot and you young'uns ride down to Strick-

land's store and get me two cases of Ball Mason canning jars."

Before she could get all the words out we were scrambling through the door to get our straw hats. In no time at all we were all squeezed on the wagon seat, Anna Lee in the middle holding the reins and whacking old Big Shot's behind with the lines to make her pick up a little speed.

"Hallelujah!" cried Clara, punching her fist into the air, and the rest of us whooped and hollered like we were crazy, the old wagon clattering along for all it was worth, four straw hats in a row and four fish-tails fluttering in the breeze behind us.

We crossed the wide meadow with a barbed-wire fence running along to our left that kept back Mr. Tucker's cows, then entered a grove of pines and emerged into the clearing again with that same fence running along our left, covered with white and yellow honeysuckle blossoms.

Ever since May the honeysuckle had been blooming, and now here it was mid-July and it was still emanating its breathtaking fragrance that made you think of far-off places and beautiful things.

I clutched my chest and leaned toward the fragrance. "Mmmmm!" I said. "I wish I could bottle that wonderful scent and wear it always."

As old Big Shot swept the wagon into the gray path down to Mr. Strickland's store, Anna Lee pulled tightly on the reins to slow her down. Now

we could do some serious talking while old Big Shot just moped along and rested some.

"We'll stop by the juke joint on our way back," said Anna Lee. It was the first time we had actually mentioned it since we left home; we had laughed and joked and acted silly — everything but mentioning that. If going to one of Hazel's wild parties was out of the question, going to the juke joint would be like letting Aunt Rainbow or Uncle John catch us kissing some boy.

Satisfied that we would go and get the canning jars and then stop at the juke joint on our way back, we pushed the frightful and intriguing, yet exciting, prospect out of our minds and launched into a medley of songs, beginning with "Butterflies," still our favorite, whose harmony we had perfected over our many summers together.

We stopped singing and gazed at the black Ford whizzing past us down the highway.

"You know who that was!" I shouted.

It was them! Our boyfriends! They hadn't recognized us on the wagon riding along the path beside the highway. We became excited and began to act silly.

"Pass on by and see if we care!" yelled Anna Lee to the Ford moving on out of sight.

"Yeah, think you big shots just 'cause you riding in that little old shiny Ford while we ride in the blame wagon!" said Clara.

"Little peaheads sitting up here don't see nobody," said Dolly.

I grabbed Dolly's hand and squeezed it to the bone with excitement. "They might stop at the juke joint!" I said.

"Sho had!" they chorused, and we fell into hysteria at the thought of being with them at the juke joint, dancing in their arms to the slow, intoxicating music on the juke box.

"Giddap!" yelled Anna Lee to old Big Shot, whacking her behind with the lines and forcing her into a steady trot. "We gotta hurry up and get to the store and get the canning jars so we can have a lot of time at the juke joint."

"I bet they don't even go there," said Clara, rolling her eyes down the road behind them.

"That's where they headed," said Anna Lee. "Where else you think they going, girl?"

Anna Lee practically rushed old Big Shot's tongue out getting down to the store. And when we turned off the path and rolled across the highway and up into the store yard, there were only a few people standing out in the yard talking under the shade of oaks.

As old Big Shot pulled the wagon up in the store yard all heads turned and looked at us.

"Oh, Lord!" said Anna Lee. "They done heard about us seeing Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts."

"Oh, Lord!" I said.

"Look!" said Anna Lee. "There's Grandpa!

Don't nobody want to see him. All he thinks about is ghosts."

Grandpa was not our grandpa, but an elderly man named Harley Lightfoot. Our Aunt Twila was an avid teller of ghost stories, but Grandpa was the champion. He often came to Uncle John's house on Saturday and Sunday nights, when Uncle John lived at the old place, and he and Aunt Twila would get together and see which one could tell the most horrible ghost story.

When old Big Shot stopped under the shade tree, Anna Lee jumped down from the wagon and tied her to the low limb of the big oak, and we got down, smoothing our dresses and keeping our heads low, hoping Grandpa wouldn't come over.

Then from across the wide white sandy store yard came: "Hey there, you John Duley girls, wait up!"

"Lord, here he comes," said Anna Lee under her breath, pretending she hadn't heard him call to us, as Clara and Dolly and I were doing.

Grandpa left the four men he had been standing talking to and walked over to us. "How you girls doing?"

"How you, Grandpa," we chorused, inching toward the store.

"I heard all about it," said Grandpa. "Y'all seen 'em, didn't you? Seen 'em with your own eyes?"

Grandpa was short and so frail that his faded overalls looked as if they had no one inside them.

He had a reddish-brown leathery complexion and a long gray beard, and he smacked his lips together every few words when he was talking to you.

"Y'all don't have to come right out and admit it," said Grandpa, glancing around the yard in a secretive manner, as if this was just between him and us. "Your uncle being proud of that beautiful little place over there like he is, and not wanting y'all to be uneasy living over there. But it's all right. Y'all can tell old Grandpa 'bout it. Bet it make the hair rise up on the back of you neck. Didn't it?" He stood rolling his cloudy eyes around at us, while we remained silent, throwing each other furtive glances and looking mostly down at the ground, wishing he would leave us alone.

Anna Lee said, "Grandpa, we ain't seen nothing but some folks, a real man and lady coming walking toward us on that path. Won't Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts after all."

Grandpa narrowed his eyes in total disbelief, a teasing smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Well, say and do what you has to, but I knows how y'all felt when you saw your first ghost. Me, I just about died of fright when I saw mine. That was a long time ago, when I'as about y'all's age. My grandma came back one night and tucked the covers around my neck . . ."

I didn't want Grandpa stirring up the fear of ghosts that I had been trying so desperately to forget, and neither did the others. Grandpa had

already started in on his litany of ghost stories, and would have us shaking in our sandals before he finished, if we didn't get away.

I said, "Anna Lee, you know Aunt Rainbow's waiting right now for those canning jars."

"Sho is," she cried, and we turned to move on toward the store, trying not to be disrespectful. But Grandpa followed us.

"Let ole Grandpa tell y'all girls something," he said, waving a long bony finger at us, after we had stopped out of respect right at the door of the store. Anna Lee even had her hand on the screen door to pull it open.

He smacked his lips. "See, a lot of people don't know this. But once a ghost has ever let itself be seen by somebody, it'll haunt that person . . . them persons . . . to death. Every time you turn around you'll see it . . ." he looked at us, "or them. Some nights when you're in bed you'll feel the covers slipping from around your shoulders, and if you look up you'll see 'em standing right over you, white and blurry, looking down on you."

"Come on, y'all," said Anna Lee, pulling open the screen door. "We gotta hurry up and get Aunt Rainbow's canning jars. She's waiting for them." She hurried inside the dark store and we followed. But so did Grandpa.

Inside the darkened store Mr. Strickland was standing behind the counter as we walked in. Three white men and one black one were sitting

at a table in a corner next to the old pot-bellied, cold stove, drinking bottled drinks. Above an old ceiling fan creaked and moaned.

"Good evening, girls," said Mr. Strickland.

"How do you do, Mr. Strickland," we chorused.

"How's John and Rainbow doing?"

"They fine, Mr. Strickland," said Anna Lee.

"Aunt Rainbow wants two cases of Ball Mason canning jars, Mr. Strickland."

"Did you girls really see the old Battses' ghosts?"

"No sir, Mr. Strickland," said Anna Lee. "They won't no ghosts. They was people we saw that day in the woods."

"You don't say." He turned to go get the canning jars. Dolly and Clara and I moved up to the counter where Anna Lee was standing, trying to avoid Grandpa. We had each planned to buy a cold bottled drink and stand there in the store and enjoy them, but now Grandpa was on our heels waiting to give us further advice about ghosts. We wanted to get the canning jars and get out of there as fast as we possibly could.

It took Mr. Strickland a year it seemed to go back and get the canning jars, which gave Grandpa time to finish what he had started outside.

"What I was trying to tell you girls is that ghosts don't always look like ghosts. Sometimes they looks just like real flesh and blood people. But if you reach out and touch 'em your hand'll

go right through them like smoke. Sometimes that's the only way you can tell if it's a ghost."

One of the men sitting at the table laughed. "Grandpa, how you gonna know who's a ghost and who ain't, then? You can't go 'round poking people with your finger." The other men laughed.

Anna Lee took the jars Mr. Strickland finally brought and we hurried out of the store, leaving Grandpa and the men still discussing ghosts.

"Hurry up, y'all," said Anna Lee, untying old Big Shot from the tree as fast as she possibly could. "Before Grandpa gets out here."

Then as old Big Shot pulled the wagon across the yard and across the highway to our path running alongside the highway, we sat silent, bouncing up and down on the seat, thinking of what Grandpa had said.

None of us wanted to admit it, but Grandpa had made our fears of the Battses' ghosts resurface. We chose to concentrate on our sneaky trip to the juke joint. But that was difficult.

"We better hurry up," said Anna Lee. "Look how far down the sun is."

"Yeah," I said. "God forbid we get caught in the dark." All eyes turned to me nervously. There came a total silence as our eyes surveyed the shadowy woods, deep and hushed, stretching along on our left and across the highway on our right.

"I bet them jarheads didn't even stop there," said Clara, deliberately changing the subject.

"I betcha they did," said Anna Lee. "Clarence probably sitting there right now wishing he could come see me this evening, honey."

Clara said, "Tommy said he's coming over there to see me if he have to duck some buckshot from Uncle John's shotgun."

I said, "Larry might be at the house right now waiting for me."

Dolly said, "Cecil probably over there right now at the juke joint down on his knees praying I'll come by." We had to laugh.

Anna Lee shot her nose up in the air. "Couldn't none of y'all's boyfriends go nowhere if Clarence didn't take 'em. He the one got the car." Clarence was the owner of the Ford. He was the oldest of the four boys. He and my friend Larry were tall and lanky, and Clara and Dolly's friends were short and muscular.

Clara said, "Old Clarence ought to own something, big as his head is." And at that we pounced on each other's boyfriends.

"I betcha they didn't even stop there," repeated Clara as we neared the turnoff that led up in the woods to the juke joint. Then as old Big Shot swung the wagon onto the rutted path, we grew nervous.

The right front wagon wheel hit down into a large rut in the path and we all slumped to one side. Dolly said, "Anna Lee, s'pose somebody we

know sees us at the juke joint and tells Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John."

Anna Lee said, "Ah, stop worrying your little head so much, girl, ain't nobody gonna tell Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow nothing. Everybody knows that Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John ought to let us go somewhere sometime. They look and see us coming and say, well, looka there. There come the John Duley girls. They done slipped away. Ain't that good."

"You wish," I said.

"Yeah, you wish," said Dolly. "Aunt Rainbow gonna skin our tails like a rabbit." Then she uttered a little happy squeal and nearly squeezed the blood out of my arm. "Lord, I sho hope they there!"

The juke joint was a little square white building hidden back amongst the tall pines. It sat in a clearing, and tacked to its front were signs reading Pepsi-Cola, 7-Up, Chesterfield Cigarettes, and others. It was owned by Mr. Cecil Bean, the brother of Mr. John Bean, the first Negro to own land in Bird Song, the one who had inspired Uncle John so greatly.

As we looked and saw the little white building coming into view, we craned our necks and searched desperately for a particular black Ford that might be parked in the weedy parking lots on either side of the juke joint.

"They there!" Clara shrieked.

Anna Lee said, "Clara girl, I could kiss you. How'd you know they'd be here this evening, when you suggested we sneak away and come?"

Clara raised her eyebrows and threw her nose in the air. "I just knowed. I could feel the vibrations of my sweet Tommy telling me to *come, come* down to the juke joint today."

Anna Lee stopped the wagon a good distance from the juke joint and tied up old Big Shot. We hopped down, patting our hair and strolling toward the place, trying to look dignified as if we had just stepped from a long black shiny Cadillac.

Anna Lee said, "Now, y'all, we can't let them think we came here looking for them. Let's go in and go straight to the counter and order barbecue sandwiches to go. Everybody knows Mr. Cecil sells the best barbecue around here. And we just stopped by on our way from the store for Aunt Rainbow to get a sandwich."

Clara said, "S'pose they with other girls when we get in there?"

I said, "We'll pretend we don't see 'em, get our barbecue sandwiches, and walk right out as nice as you please."

"I'll knock Clarence's block off!" said Anna Lee.

Leading the way, Anna Lee pulled open the screen door and walked in and we followed on her heels, straight to the counter. The place was smoky and dark inside, three couples on the floor

dancing close together to the slow music coming from the jukebox, other couples sitting in the dark booths on one side of the room. Come ten or eleven o'clock tonight the place would be so crowded you couldn't get in.

Just as Anna Lee walked up to the counter and told a saucer-eyed Mr. Cecil that we wanted four barbecue sandwiches and cold drinks to go, Clarence turned and said, "Anna Lee!" We looked and there sat all four of the boys to our left, eating barbecue sandwiches and drinking bottled drinks.

They bought us sandwiches and cold drinks and we paired off and sat at the counter eating and talking. The boys were nice-looking, and had the same smooth high-brown complexions and dark curly hair. They wore short sleeve shirts and dress pants and wide-brim hats cocked jauntily on their heads.

Larry said they had been sitting there trying to muster enough courage to come over to the house.

We finished eating and when another slow record came on the jukebox, Clarence took Anna Lee by the hand and led her out on the floor to dance, and we followed. We danced to two slow records. Then we went and sat in the booths and licked ice cream cones and talked some more, losing all sense of time, we were having so much fun.

The boys begged us to let them come over that

night, but we said some other time, because we didn't know how Uncle John might take it. He could be downright embarrassing sometimes. We promised them that come hell or high water we would attend Hazel's next big party. Meanwhile we would write each other letters.

When we said our goodbyes and pushed open the screen door and stepped outside our mouths flew open. It was almost dark!

We jumped on the wagon and Anna Lee untied old Big Shot and the wagon came clacking down the rutted path. Anna Lee whacked the lines against old Big Shot's rump.

"Lord, we gonna get it now," said Dolly.

I said, "I don't know which one's the worst, the fussing Aunt Rainbow gonna put on us or them dark woods we got to go through."

"Hush, girl!" said Clara. "Nobody hadn't even thought about no ghosts till you mentioned it!"

The wagon swung out of the path leading from the juke joint and lunged onto the path running along the edge of the woods that we had traveled earlier. The shadowy woods to our left was already humming with the nightly choruses of frogs and crickets. The air was already damp and smelled of skunk and other wild things.

As we left the path behind Mr. Tucker's house and headed across the clearing to the grove of woods, we sat huddled close together on the seat, silent. All I could think about was what Grandpa

had said at the store, and I knew the others must have had their minds on the same thing, from the way they kept cutting their eyes around and turning to glance behind us. As we left the clearing to go through the grove of woods, I felt the hair at the back of my neck stand on edge and my skin break out in goosebumps. I kept my eyes directly between old Big Shot's ears as she trotted along, afraid that if I looked anywhere else I would see Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts standing looking at us. And I noticed that the other girls were staring straight ahead also.

Dusk has a way of making everything look like photograph negatives, gray and ghostlike. The trees that enclosed us on both sides looked like black woolly bears. Sitting on the very end on the left side of the seat, I pressed against Dolly, feeling my whole left side throbbing with fear. I longed to be on the inside. Clara, on the opposite end of the seat, must have been leaning hard against Anna Lee, for I kept being forced back to the spot I had just left.

We were deathly quiet. The only sound was the wheels of the wagon pulling through the loose sand on the path and the wagon creaking and groaning as old Big Shot trotted along, tired and weary, but afraid that if she slowed down Anna Lee would whack her again. We were biting our tongues and being silent as if the least bit of noise would bring out the ghosts.

When the wagon emerged into the clearing of the meadow, we let out a deep sigh of relief. By now it was totally dark, a velvety black kind of dark that comes just before the moon comes out.

Then, far up ahead on our path we saw something! It was a light!

Anna Lee cried, "Y'all see that?"

"Yes, Lord!" Clara uttered.

Dolly began to cry, making little frantic, high-pitched sounds as she clawed my arm.

"Anna Lee!" I cried. "What we gonna do? We gotta pass. We can't go back!"

"How well I know that, honey!" said Anna Lee, her voice barely above a whisper. "Y'all just hold on, child!"

There was nothing for us to do but hang on and pass the wavering light that was heading toward us. With old Big Shot galloping now, we clung to one another, bouncing up and down and fighting desperately to remain on the seat. As we neared the wavering light all four of us let out a piercing scream! There stood a man and woman, the man holding the light!

Suddenly the man jumped out in front of old Big Shot, waving his arms as if trying to stop the mule. Anna Lee kept whipping old Big Shot, all four of us screaming at the top of our voices. We had traveled a good distance past the man and woman before we realized it was Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow coming up the path to meet us.

Anna Lee stopped the mule and we sat waiting for Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow to catch up to us, feeling so embarrassed that we could have died. Uncle John must have realized why we were screaming. We knew we were in for it.

We could hear Aunt Rainbow coming down the path behind us.

"You young'uns know good and well that you have no business out here after dark. Anna Lee!" she called, coming up to the wagon. "What made you stay away from this house so long?"

We didn't tell about going by the juke joint. We told Aunt Rainbow how we had run into Grandpa down at the store and he had kept us for the longest time, telling us all those old ghost stories, and we couldn't hardly walk away without making it look as if we were being disrespectful.

But giving Aunt Rainbow excuses after you had done something to upset her was like blowing your breath to the wind. She fussed at us all the way back to the house, she and Uncle John sitting on the back of the wagon. They threatened to tell Mama on Clara and me for not doing our part to get back home before dark.

Uncle John rode silently, letting Aunt Rainbow lay our souls to rest. Then he started in.

"Letting that old man put all that hogwash in y'all's heads about ghosts!" he yelled up to us sitting meekly on the seat, wishing we were already home.

“When is you young’uns gonna learn that folks don’t want you to have nothing.” He paused a long minute, then started in on us again. “Coming down that path screaming like a bunch of fools! I’m glad nobody else didn’t hear you! I’m ashamed of you!”

Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John fussed at us all the way back to the house, and fussed at us through the door while we got ready for bed, and after we were in bed we still could hear them mumbling about us in their room.

7

Come Monday the tobacco in the fields, having had two extra days to ripen, was tremendous. The morning was hectic, loaded trucks of tobacco piling up on us, hardly giving us time to run to the water bucket and get a drink of cool water. We had brought the old radio from the house and we would run out on the hard white clay floor of the barnyard and dance. But when the hour came and the *Sepia Serenade* came on, all we could do was pat our foot to the music while we worked like fighting fire.

We were one big family at the scaffold, Anna Lee and Johnny Mae looping, and the rest of us handing the tobacco to them. But when it came to doing something underhanded, you didn't discuss it with anyone, at least Aunt Rainbow wouldn't.

But when we caught up we told Johnny Mae. We grabbed the last few green leaves from the bottom of the truck and pushed it aside and we

girls whooped for joy, seeing that no other truck was in sight. We ran and got a big green-striped-skin watermelon from the shade and sliced it and took a piece and ran to our favorite place in the cool shade under the lean-to shelter.

The four of us and Johnny Mae sat swinging our legs from the ledgelike bench high up off the ground and eating watermelon. It was sweet and good and refreshing after such a hectic morning. Johnny Mae relished our bold act when we told her, laughter bubbling up from deep down inside her. "Well, if y'all can get away with that, y'all can definitely come to Hazel's next party. Child, she's having the Sugar Drippers!" With our mouths wide open, we shrieked, "The Sugar Drippers!"

The Sugar Drippers, four handsome young males, were our favorite singing group. Many a day we had beat and slapped the old radio, emitting only static, trying to get their rich and resonant voices to come through. We had two of their records and we were dying to get to town and buy their latest recording. The Sugar Drippers had even appeared at the Memorial Auditorium in Raleigh. They were hot! We could hardly believe they would be coming to Hazel's party. But Hazel knew a lot of people and had connections. Besides, Hazel charged the crowd of people that would come to the party dearly, and she could afford to pay the group their asking price.

Even before we knew the Sugar Drippers would be appearing at Hazel's next party, we had told our boyfriends that we would be there. So it was no wonder now that we believed that we would die a slow agonizing death afterwards, if we did not get to that party and see the Sugar Drippers in person.

We were glad to see dinnertime come. Since we lived so far back now, Anna Lee no longer left an hour earlier and went home and warmed up dinner and set the table. We all left early on the wagon.

Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow had never guessed where we had been that night we got home late, but they had been closed-mouth with us ever since. But now we could tell it was wearing off. When we got to the house and were standing at the well washing the tobacco gum from our hands, Uncle John sidled over to us.

"I'm sorry I called you young'uns fools the other night," he said. "But me and your Aunt Rainbow was worried to death about y'all." He looked over at me and Clara. "Clara, you and Grace, we responsible for y'all. Your Mama trust us to see to it that nothing happens to you. We aim to hand y'all back over to your Mama and Daddy just like she give you to us." (We knew what that meant.) "And Anna Lee, you and Dolly, me and your Aunt Rainbow think of you as our own children. I know you got a daddy. But Aunt Rainbow loves you just like a mama would, and she feels responsible

for your welfare. And your daddy appreciates what we're trying to do for y'all." Uncle John dipped the gourd into the tub of water and filled it and poured it over his dusty feet and wiped them dry with an old towel. We knew he had not finished with us. "And for God's sake young'uns, stop listening to crazy folks like your aunt Twila, and old Grandpa, filling your heads with all their hogwash about ghosts. That kind of stuff can ruin your whole life.

"Let me tell you what it can do to a person. Your uncle Luke, God rest his soul, my own dear brother, lost his wife, and he was scared to death to stay in that house by hisself. He had to stay with other relatives at night, unless somebody volunteered to stay with him. Stay away from his own home now, can you believe that? And for what? All because when he was growing up all folks talked was ghosts. At least in our family . . . and there were other families, too . . . but I know that in our family, every time somebody died, somebody would always come running in the house late at night, out of breath, saying they'd seen the ghost of that dead person."

I said, "Uncle John, how come you didn't turn out to be afraid of ghosts like Mama and the rest of your family?"

"I used to be, child," he said. "God knows I used to be. I've seen the time that somebody close to me died and I was so scared of the dark, thinking

I'd see their ghost, that I couldn't function. And this is since I've been a grown man. I was so scared that I would literally let my hogs go unfed, if I couldn't get them fed before dark. Now you know that was awful! Then one night when my brother Elvin died . . . ”

Uncle John looked at us. “Y'all know me and Elvin was close. Elvin died and I was sick with fear after the sun went down. Lord, I was acting like a crazy person, my nightly chores piling up on me . . . every time I'd step out the door after dark my eyes was darting in front and behind me, my heart racing, sweat popping out on me . . . ” He looked around at us. “And all because of the *fear-of-ghosts* that's been passed down in our family. Well, one day I just decided that this thing had ruined my life long enough. It wasn't gonna control me anymore. I was gonna control it. I said to myself, if there is such a thing as a ghost, what can it do to you? It don't bite or pinch or scratch. I never in my life heard nobody say they was hurt by a ghost. Have y'all?” He looked around at us.

We traded glances but didn't respond. Uncle John went on, despite the fact that Aunt Rainbow was standing in the back door calling us to dinner, her hands on her hips, wondering what was taking us so long, since everybody else was already inside eating.

“So I decided that if seeing a ghost — which I've never seen — couldn't hurt me physically,

then a little heart racing and sweating couldn't kill you. So I began to ignore the feeling, and more and more the fear subsided, till one day I looked around and it was gone." He looked around at us. "So do you young'uns see why it upsets me so much when I hear things like y'all coming back running through the woods and strewing peaches, or coming down the path screaming like somebody gone mad, just because of that old fear of ghosts? I want y'all to promise me that you'll try your best to rid yourself of this fear. Will y'all do that for Uncle John? Huh?" He stood waiting for our answer.

We traded glances.

"Will y'all promise Uncle John that? Will you? Will you promise me that you'll enjoy the rest of your summer together and not let me hear you mention ghosts again?"

Anna Lee said, "Yes sir, Uncle John. We promise you that you won't hear us say another word about a ghost." We looked at each other, knowing what she meant.

We ran inside and grabbed our places at the table, everybody looking up from their plates at us. We ate heartily, cabbages and white potatoes and brown peas boiled in seasoning meat, and golden corn pone cut in slices, and sliced tomatoes and cucumbers and green pepper, and washed it all down with cold buttermilk. For dessert Aunt Rainbow had made a tomato pudding.

After dinner we hurriedly cleaned up the kitchen and, like the others had done, ran outside and found a shady spot to grab a few precious winks. Soon Mr. Tucker the overseer sounded the old iron bell atop the post, yanking and yanking on the rope, beckoning us back to a long evening of work.

That evening the load was not quite so heavy. We even caught up twice. The second time we even had enough time to run under the lean-to shelter and talk private. Johnny Mae filled us up on the latest gossip.

Johnny Mae said that Aunt Jimmy, our medicine woman of Bird Song, that some people said was a witch, had been arrested for selling medicine without a license. They had soon let her go. She was back to her fortune-telling and curing people with the magic potions she had learned from her great-great-grandfather who had been a medicine man in Africa.

That evening back at home, after a supper of fried chicken and gravy and hot biscuits, we girls were in the kitchen washing dishes and singing and acting silly. Then we got serious, and began to talk about Uncle John.

Anna Lee said, "No matter how many ghosts we see from now on . . . if we see a thousand . . . we can't tell Uncle John. It hurts his feelings something awful to think that we don't

love this little new house over here, on his own land, as much as he do. But I realize now, that Uncle John, on the other hand, hates to see us grow up scared of ghosts, says it'll ruin our lives."

I said, "Uncle John's right, Anna Lee. It's already ruined my life."

"Mine, too," said Clara.

"Mine, too," said Dolly.

I said, "I'm gonna try hard to do like Uncle John and get rid of my fear of ghosts. If I don't, when I get married, and God forbid, my husband dies, I'll be just like Uncle Luke . . . scared to death to stay in my own house, thinking one night I'll look through the dark and see him standing over the bed looking down on me."

"Hush, Grace," said Clara. "You make the hair rise up on the back of my neck!"

"Me, too," said Dolly. "You sound just like Aunt Twila."

I said, "Aunt Twila is the main one that's caused most of the fear of ghosts in our generation. Y'all remember how she used to get us all in one room on Saturday nights and tell us all them hair-raising ghost stories?"

"Yeah, we remember," Dolly said.

I said, "Clara, remember that time when Grandma died, and we spent the night there at her house just after the funeral?" I looked around at Clara.

"I remember," said Clara. "Aunt Twila was there that night."

"Yeah," I said. "And remember, me and you was lying on a little pallet Mama had fixed for us, and Aunt Twila waited till the house was quiet and came to us and told us that Grandma loved us so much, that later on that night we might look up and see her standing over us smiling."

"Yeah," said Clara. "That was the most miserable night of my life."

"Mine, too," I said. "I liked to of smothered to death. It was about ninety degrees in that room that night and I kept the sheet pulled over my head and tucked around my shoulders all night, scared I'd see Grandma standing over us."

Dolly said, "Aunt Twila ought to of been ashamed of herself, scaring y'all like that."

"Sho had," I said, "cause we was just babies then."

"Sho was," said Clara, looking off into the distance, frowning.

All the time me and Clara and Dolly had been relating incidents about ghosts, Anna Lee had been quiet for some reason, only moving her eyes from face to face as we talked.

Dolly suddenly turned to Anna Lee and said, "Why you acting like you ain't scared of ghosts or something?"

Anna Lee shot her nose in the air. "I ain't."

Clara rolled her eyes up at Anna Lee. "Well, if you ain't, then who was that running through the woods the other day, her dress riding high up over her knees, strewing peaches as she went?"

We laughed, and then we began to tease one another about that day.

Anna Lee said, "I'm sorry. I don't care what Uncle John says. Them was ghosts we saw!"

Clara said, "I believe so, too, Anna Lee."

Dolly looked around at us and fixed her mouth like she wanted to cry. "Don't y'all say that! It scares me!"

"Me too," I said. "Uncle John talking 'bout it was a lady and a man coming along the path meeting us. Ain't nobody been through them woods in ages, Ned said so, and so did Uncle Nedro."

"They ain't," said Anna Lee. "Nobody got no reason to come through there, 'cause they done made another path around the woods. Who'd want to walk through some deep dark woods, unless they was taking a shortcut, like we was? Nobody got no reason to take a shortcut through there. Ain't nowhere for nobody to want to get quick, 'cept here. And don't nobody come here."

"Lordy, lordy, lordy!" said Dolly, hugging her arms around her waist and making little frantic cries. "Y'all done brought all this stuff back up and now I'm scared to death!"

I said, "I been *trying* to think them was real

people we saw. Lord!" I looked around at the kitchen window. The setting sun had painted it a brilliant gold. But soon it would be pitch-dark, and then our troubles would start. We'd all be back to our scary selves, pulling the covers over our heads at night, and at the least little creak of the house, asking from under the cover, "Did you hear that?"

Suddenly Aunt Rainbow came bounding into the kitchen.

"Ain't you young'uns finished this kitchen yet? Y'all hurry up and finish. I want you to go down yonder by the cornfield and pick the rest of them peas before it gets dark." She walked out, hurrying to another one of her nightly chores, leaving us standing looking at each other, knowing that the row of field peas stretching along the bank of the cornfield stood right down there by those ghostly woods!

"Hurry up, y'all," cried Anna Lee, leading the way down to the pea patch. A foot tub for her and Clara to put the peas in dangled from her wrist, and I carried one for Dolly and me.

We hurried along, our mouths closed, our eyes occasionally darting toward those dreadful woods. We moved on until we came upon the row of peas.

Dolly and I began at one end and Anna Lee and Clara walked to the far end of the row and began picking, so that we could meet in the middle. We

bent our backs and went to work, picking wildly, trying to beat the sun that was slowly disappearing into blue-gray dusk dark.

My back was aching and I came up for a breath of air. And with the thick green cornfields hiding the house, those frightening woods down the hill from us looked even more threatening, and made one feel abandoned. The woods facing us were not far from where we had spotted what we now admitted we thought were the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts.

From where Dolly and I were bent over picking, we could look down the long row and see nothing but Anna Lee and Clara's bent backs, picking and picking away. For a long time it looked as if we were not coming closer together at all, and the sinking sun was winning out over us. Then, gradually the two aching backs on one end met up with the two aching backs on the opposite end, and by now it was *dark*.

Each of us had only a handful to go before we stood and straightened our backs. We picked frantically to finish. Anna Lee finished first; we continued plucking the last peas. She stretched and gave out a delightful moan. Just as I plucked my last pea and stood, I heard Anna Lee shriek. I looked at her and she was pointing down toward the woods. "Look!" she whispered. My eyes flew toward the woods and there stood a lady and a man, standing side by side, looking right up the

hill at us. I screamed and fell backwards over the tub of peas and scuffled in the dirt and got to my feet again and grabbed at Anna Lee as she streaked past me. Clara and Dolly looked and screamed and took off across the field behind me; Anna Lee was already turning the bend of the cornfield.

When I came to my senses we were racing up the porch steps, where we dropped the tub of peas and fell to the floor gasping for breath. I don't remember how we got home, but I felt my knee stinging and looked down and it was raw and bleeding; Anna Lee's legs were scratched and bleeding and studded with briars, where she had run through wild growth and entanglement. Clara had run through a muddy ditch and had mud caked all the way up to her knee, and Dolly's dress was ripped at the waist and hanging lopsided, where one of us had grabbed at her, trying to get past her.

We got our breath back and sat in silence on the porch, stunned. Inside the house Aunt Rainbow went about her sewing and mending; Uncle John sat looking over the evening paper.

We felt so alone and frustrated, all four of us now squeezed in the swing, the swing barely moving.

We sat silent for the longest time, the light squeal of the swing falling in rhythm with the frogs and crickets that had come out and begun

their evening serenade. And it was cool now, the air moist and refreshing on our sweaty bodies.

Anna Lee broke the weary silence. "Like I said, y'all. We can't say nothing about this to Uncle John!"

We already knew that.

8

Two whole weeks had gone by since we had spotted the ghosts the second time. It had been the most difficult thing that either of us had ever done in our entire lives, but we had told no one. We had even tried, as we had done at the first sighting of the ghosts, to convince ourselves that what we had seen were real people. But we were totally convinced that Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts did exist.

Getting up in the morning and going to the scaffold and working hard all day and coming back home and doing our chores and going to bed, we had moved about like mechanical dolls. We stayed close to one another during the day, finding our only comfort in each other, feeling as if we were all alone in the world. Our nights were devastating.

Aunt Rainbow had begun to show some concern. She was never one to coddle us, but now as we moped around with distant looks on our faces

she was beginning to express a kind of reluctant sympathy toward us. She had made each of us a frilly skirt with a big ruffle at the bottom, blue, pink, yellow, and pea-green; she had even let us use her best scented soap to bathe with. She had let us go visit Mable and Roxanne Bean at their home each Sunday after church.

We figured that Aunt Rainbow thought we were depressed. After all, this summer had been like no other summer we had spent together. It had not been our usual time of fun and foolishness.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning in early August, with a nip of fall in the air. It was around seven-thirty. Roxanne and Mable would be by pretty soon to take us to Sunday school and church at the Red Oak Church. Across the red dirt road from the church was the three-room Red Oak School that we four once attended; even our parents had gone to school there.

It would not be long before Clara and I would have to go back to Raleigh and start school. We had all come to the conclusion that we were not going to spend our remaining few precious weeks together in agony. We simply had to find a way to relieve ourselves of this terrible fear.

Breakfast was on the table, and dinner was still rattling the pot lids on the stove. Aunt Rainbow was standing at the stove and looking over her glasses as she slid big brown biscuits from the old black baker and piled them, steaming, onto a long

platter. Her homemade apron, an unbleached flour sack, white after many washings, hugged her broad hips and came around and tied at the back. It hung far below her blue-and-white print dress, almost to her ankles. Anna Lee was standing at the end of the table, prying off the top of a mason jar of blackberry preserves, her tongue pressed against the corner of her mouth. I was coming from the refrigerator, carrying a big jar of cold sweet milk. Dolly and Clara had finished the housecleaning and were walking through the door from the dining area to the kitchen, as we all prepared to sit down to breakfast.

The sun was just peeping over the horizon, and a ray of brilliant gold had lit up the windowpanes in the kitchen. I walked to the window and looked out thinking how I might describe the sunrise on paper.

Soon we were all sitting down at the table eating. All except Aunt Rainbow. She always remained on her feet. She stood back and glanced up and down the table with a sense of pride and accomplishment gleaming in her eyes. She enjoyed seeing her big hot biscuits dripping with homemade butter disappearing from the plates. When she did sit down, she was constantly jumping up and wrapping the dishrag around the handle of the spluttering coffeepot and refilling the men's cups.

After breakfast was over, we women washed

up the breakfast dishes and finished dinner, and Aunt Rainbow made dessert.

When it came to desserts Aunt Rainbow had her specialties. She made a delicious cake with many thin layers, using a sweet-milk filling that she boiled down to a thick cream. She made apple jacks and sweet-potato jacks, and luscious tomato pudding. It was not really a pudding; my people called lots of things puddings. Even a plain cake baked in a long baker was called a sugar pudding.

Aunt Rainbow slid a tomato pudding from the oven now, the edges brown and crispy. "Hurry up, young'uns!" she said. "Sun's getting on up yonder! We gotta get away from here!"

I had a basin of hot water I had poured from the kettle on the stove, on my way to the back room to take my bath. Anna Lee was giving the tablecloth one last swipe with the dishrag, hurrying to take her bath, too. Dolly and Clara were already in the back room. I heard them laughing and talking. I banged on the door. "Hey, y'all let me in!"

In our private dressing room, the door locked securely, we moved about hurriedly, half-naked, washing, talking.

Stripped from the waist up, Anna Lee was standing gazing out the window that looked out over a cornfield, sprinkling talcum powder in her hand and rubbing it on her body. I looked at her

impatiently, stripped down to her panties, scrubbing her armpits.

"Girl, gimme that soap!" I said, frowning, reaching my hand out for it.

"Wait a minute, Grace!" she snapped. "I ain't even washed south of the border yet, down Mexico way."

Fastening her bra, Clara said in a serious tone of voice, "For heaven's sake, Grace! Don't rush her! Please give her time to wash *Mexico*!" We laughed, and just then Aunt Rainbow swept heavily past the door, giving it a pound with her fist.

"You young'uns hurry up in there I said!"

We were so used to Aunt Rainbow rushing us around in everything we did, that we hardly ever changed our pace when she yelled at us.

"We got to tell somebody we saw the Battses again," Clara said. Looking around at us, a weary expression on her face. "I've had it."

"Me, too," I said. "It's killing me!"

Clara said, "We been crazy, trying to hide something like this, just 'cause Uncle John thinks folks ought not believe in ghosts."

"Sho have," said Dolly. "Let Uncle John see one with his own eyes and see how much he goes around saying don't believe in ghosts."

After our baths, we dressed in our brand-new skirts and snow-white sleeveless blouses and nylon stockings and black patent leather pumps.

Then we unrolled our washed and straightened hair from the brown strips of paper bag and combed it out, and applied our makeup. We went out on the front porch to wait for Mable and Roxanne. Aunt Rainbow had already told us we could go home with them after church and spend a few hours, if we wanted.

On the front porch the early morning air was cool and refreshing, and it smelled of cornfields and watermelons, and our fragrant bath soap and talcum powder.

Anna Lee and I had grabbed the swing and were sitting swinging gently back and forth. Clara and Dolly had sat down in the two single wooden chairs next to the swing. They sat now with their legs crossed in a sophisticated manner; when we got dressed up we all tried to act dignified.

We were ahead of schedule. All those mornings of getting up before the chickens and following a hectic schedule had trained us to be on time. There was ample time for serious talk about our dire situation, before we would look across the field and see Mr. John Bean's black shiny Ford coming.

All we wanted was our precious carefree days together back.

Anna Lee pressed her big toe against the porch floor and stopped the swing flat. She glared at us, saucer-eyed. "Y'all know what?"

"What?" we chorused.

"We ought to pay Aunt Jimmy a little visit!"

She waited for our response. All we did was stare at her. She could come up with some of the most bizarre ideas.

Clara said, "Anna Lee. *What* can Aunt Jimmy do to help us?"

Anna Lee threw out both arms in a gesture of defeat. "I don't know! Maybe she could give us some kind of magic powder to sprinkle around the edge of the woods to keep the ghosts from coming out!" Anna Lee laughed, and we did too. It sounded so ridiculous.

"Seriously," said Anna Lee. "What we gonna do?"

We all sat looking thoughtfully across the porch, trying to come up with some solution. We were in a situation we had never been in before. All our lives we had been told stories of people seeing ghosts, which could or could not have been true. No matter how much those stories frightened us, we always had the choice to believe them or not believe them. But now we had *seen* ghosts with our own eyes. We were in a state of confusion. We didn't want to believe in ghosts, but what other explanation was there for the man and woman we had sighted down at the edge of those desolate woods — twice?

I said, "Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if we discovered that what we saw were real people? I mean if Uncle John is right then . . ."

"Then it would be like old times," Clara said.

“Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow would have their beautiful little new home over here on their own piece of land, and we’d be free of fear and anxiety.”

I laughed to myself. “The joke would be on Mr. Haynes who sold Uncle John this land dirt-cheap. And on top of that, built him this house for almost nothing.”

Anna Lee sat frowning down at the floor, trying to let my comforting words sink in. She looked up at me. “Well, if they *are* real people we saw, who are they?” We held each other’s gazes for a long minute. “Tell me who in the world would stay down there in those woods all that time just to come out and appear to us now and then! Just tell me that!”

I hunched my shoulders.

“Yeah,” said Clara. “That’s just a big old dark and scary woods. Who’d want to hang around down there?”

Dolly stared sadly across the porch. “That means it *can’t* be nothing but ghosts we been seeing?” She sighed heavily. “I wish things could be like they used to be at the old place . . . lots of people visiting on Saturday and Sunday nights . . . the whole front porch and backyard filled with people, some playing the guitar, some singing.”

There came a long silence as we sat remember-

ing. I could almost hear the vibrant notes of the guitar as some avid player wielded out a low-down blues song. I could hear the trill voices of young children out in the yard after dark chasing lightning bugs or playing ring-plays by the moonlight.

Clara broke the silence. "Why is it that we're the only ones who ever see the ghost?"

Anna Lee said, "We ain't the only ones, child. Lots of people been seeing 'em. For the last three years. Y'all remember. Ned said folks been seeing them same two ghosts on the other side of these woods."

I said, "Ain't it strange that after all these years, people just started seeing the Batts'es' ghosts *three years ago*?" They stared at me. "Why would the ghosts wait until three years ago to show themselves?"

Anna Lee hunched her shoulders. "Blamed if I know."

"Another thing," I said. "Why the ghosts . . . or whatever they are . . . why they just hanging around the entrance of these woods over here and the entrance to the wood on the other side? Looks to me like they trying to keep folks out of them woods!"

Dolly said, "Why would *ghosts* want to keep folks out of those woods down there?"

I narrowed my eyes at the woods. The dark green mass stood motionless and serene against

the blue morning sky, unlike the mysterious and threatening jungle it appeared to be at night.

I said, "Y'all, suppose there's *something* going on down there in them woods that nobody wants us or anybody else to know about!" We looked at each other again, thinking our own thoughts.

Clara jumped up from the chair and walked across the porch and stood staring straight down toward the woods, her hands on her hips. "What's wrong with us knuckleheads?" she asked. "Why ain't we done come to our senses 'fo now?" She threw both arms outward in a gesture of regret. "We're intelligent girls, all of us good students in high school, and here we're spoiling the best days of our summer together." Standing just above the top step on the edge of the porch, she cupped both hands around her mouth and leaned toward the woods. "Yoooo, hooooo! Yoooo, hooooo! Y'all hear me down in them woods? You ain't scaring us no more!"

The rest of us hurriedly got to our feet and joined Clara at the edge of the porch and we too began hurling accusations toward the woods, loud, but not loud enough to attract the attention of anyone in the house. "You ain't scaring us no more," yelled Anna Lee, hand on hips, shaking her hips at the woods.

"Yeah!" I called, "We gonna find out what's going on 'round here."

Dolly shook her fist at the woods and then yelled

through cupped hands. "We gonna get some magic powder from Aunt Jimmy and sprinkle it around the woods and make you come out." She stopped yelling and turned and looked at us. "Who we s'pose to be talking to?"

Clara said, "Blamed if I know."

Anna Lee slapped a hand over her mouth and looked at the woods. "Y'all reckon they heard us?"

"Oh, heavens!" said Clara. "Suppose ghosts or maybe criminals are hiding something down there in the woods and they're standing listening to us? They find out we on to them, no telling *what* they might do to us!"

Dolly stared wide-eyed at the woods. "They might catch us away from the house and *murder us!*" she said.

I said, "They can't hear us way down there."

"They might!" said Anna Lee.

We looked and saw Mr. John Bean's black Ford creeping across the field.

"Here come Mable and Roxanne," I said. "Let's tell them about it."

"Naw," said Anna Lee. "It's too risky. Mr. John Bean find out and Uncle John be embarrassed to death. He wants Mr. John Bean to think he's just as proud of his land and new home as he is."

Anna Lee stuck her head inside the door and let Aunt Rainbow know we were leaving, and we went out in the yard to wait for Mable and Roxanne.

As we stood smoothing out our skirts and patting our hair, watching the Ford turn onto the path leading up to the house, Anna Lee said, "I feel like a new person. Thank God we've come to our senses! No more being scared of ghosts!" she said with no real certainty.

"Yeah," I said. "Now all we have to worry about is being murdered!"

9

As usual the church service was too long, and with the weather in the nineties it was hot and stuffy inside the crowded church. But there were paper fans that Brown's Funeral Home had contributed, their name on the front, and as everyone fanned themselves furiously, a whack, whack, whacking sound rang out throughout the church as Reverend Edwards delivered the fiery sermon.

We all sat together, Mable and Roxanne on one end. My eyes were on Reverend Edwards, now bringing his sermon to a close, but my mind was on those two people we'd spotted on our side of the woods. Who were they?

I glanced down the line at the girls. Anna Lee had rolled her handkerchief into a long white worm and was now tying it into a knot; Clara was sitting leaned over, folding and unfolding the hem of her skirt over her knees; Dolly was fumbling in her purse; all of us were obviously thinking the

same thing. We had dumped one problem and taken on another. Who could we go to for help?

Anna Lee leaned her head down and toward me, wanting to say something. I leaned my head down and met hers. "I know what we can do," she whispered.

"What?" I asked.

"We can find out what's going on down in them woods ourselves!"

Reverend Edwards finished his sermon, wiping his sweaty face with a big white handkerchief. He looked tired and sad, his black face now a grayish color from all the sweating. He walked from the podium back to the fancy, highback chair and sat down, while Miss Fannie Mae Johnson struck up the music on the piano for the closing hymn, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again," and the audience rose to their feet and began singing.

After a delicious dinner at Mable and Roxanne's house, Mable played the piano while we sang some hymns. Mable played piano for Sunday school services and substituted sometimes for Miss Fannie Mae Johnson. We girls were restless all during our stay that afternoon, because of our discussion on our way to the parked car after church, when Mable and Roxanne were standing talking to someone else. "We've got to hurry and get back home!" Anna Lee had whispered. "We gotta plan our investigation!"

"Why y'all want to leave so early?" asked Rox-

anne. "Your Aunt Rainbow don't care if y'all stay till nearly dark."

"Nothing," said Anna Lee, heading for the door, us on her heels. "We best get on back home a little early today. Aunt Rainbow didn't feel too good when we left this morning."

"Oh," said Roxanne, and went to get her purse.

It was nearly four o'clock when we got home. We waved goodbye to Mable and Roxanne and went inside and changed our clothes, and then came out and sat on the porch, our eyes on the woods.

"I'm scared," cried Dolly, hugging her arms across her chest. "We git down in them woods and git kilt and nobody won't even know it!"

"Hush whining, Dolly!" cried Anna Lee. "We ain't got no time for acting like babies. We got us some serious plans to make. I mean *serious*!"

I said, "We need to carry some kind of weapons with us down in them woods to protect ourselves."

Clara looked at Anna Lee. "Let's slip out Uncle John's old shotgun in there behind the door and take it with us. It's already loaded."

"Naw!" said Anna Lee. "Too dangerous. We don't know how to shoot no shotgun. We shoot our own tails off! We'll get us some big rocks and big fat sticks and take them with us."

Clara laughed. "What can a stick do?"

Anna Lee said, "I'm the captain of this ship! You do what I say!"

"Huh!" said Clara. "Some captain. A captain remains on his sinking ship till the last passenger is safely off. Whenever we get in trouble, first thing I see is the back of your head, your dress riding high up your little short thighs, your hair standing out behind your head, your big fat feet leading the way back home!"

Anna Lee's eyes burned through Clara. "One thing's for sure, your bowlegs be fighting that air right behind me!"

I glared at Clara. "Why'nt you stop picking on Anna Lee. At least she's trying to get our problem solved!"

Clara pounced on me. "Who asked you anything, long-neck giraffe!"

Anna Lee was still peeved over Clara's remarks about her being the first to run. "I'll show you I ain't gonna run when we git down there in them woods! You wait and see! That man and woman come out there on that path I'm gonna walk right up to 'em and look 'em in the face! If they turn and leave I'm gonna follow 'em right on through them woods till I see their faces! I'll show you who scared! I'll show your little tail! You just wait!"

I said, "Don't pay no attention to Clara, Anna Lee. She so big and bad let her lead the way."

"Well, I certainly *can* lead the way," cried Clara. "I ain't scared as she is!"

"You is *scareder* than she is!" cried Dolly.

Clara said, "You just shut up with your old pigeon-toes self, Dolly. All you do is whine and cry like a little snot-nosed baby! I'll flatten that big nose of yours so flat you can eat off it like a plate!"

Dolly sailed to her feet. "Do it then! Go 'head and do it!" She hauled off and socked Clara on the arm and took off running wildly across the porch and down the steps, Clara in hot pursuit. Clara caught her out by the tree and pinned both arms behind her. Dolly stood yelling and calling Clara every name she could think. Clara held her fast, a grin on her face.

Anna Lee and I jumped up and ran out in the yard, and as usual we paired off, Dolly and me against Clara and Anna Lee. I threw a chokehold on Clara, demanding she release Dolly. Anna Lee bent down and came up with both my legs in her arms, making me topple to the ground and release Clara's neck. There under the tree we scuffled and pushed and pulled, half-laughing, till we got out all our fear and anxiety about approaching those scary woods and confronting what might be dangerous criminals.

A few minutes later we were seated on an old flatbed tobacco truck under the tree, making serious plans.

"Here's what we gonna do," said Anna Lee. "Just so somebody'll know where we is, I'll ask Aunt Rainbow to let us go visit Aunt Ella again."

She was leaning forward, looking from face to face. And our fear was rapidly creeping back. "Then if something happens to us down there in them woods — God forbid — and we don't never come out on the other side — Aunt Rainbow will know where we at."

Anna Lee was sounding awfully bold all of a sudden. I knew it was because of Clara's teasing.

"Okay, now, we gonna take that same path we took before," continued Anna Lee. "And no matter what we see we gonna keep right on walking! I don't care how scared we get. We gonna keep right on going!" She glanced nervously at the woods. She continued. "Now that we know they ain't ghosts, we ain't that scared!" She threw Dolly a warning glance. Dolly rolled her eyes toward me. Anna Lee continued. "See, they still think we think they're ghosts. They think all they got to do is walk out and stand on the path and we'll hightail it back home. But we gonna fool 'em!"

We sat listening intently. All four of us were leg swingers when we were nervous or upset about something. With our legs crossed at the knee, we had one leg fighting the air; it was a great tension reliever.

"We'll walk right up to 'em and touch 'em, if we have to," continued Anna Lee. "'Cause we got to make sure they real people, once and for all."

Clara said, "What if they turn and run when they see *we* ain't gonna run?"

Anna Lee snapped, "We'll follow them all the way through the woods if we have to, till we see their faces!" She was gonna prove to Clara that she was no scaredy cat.

"See, y'all," Anna Lee continued, "once we establish the fact that these are real people, we got 'em. Then we can go to the sheriff!"

I said, "Yeah, once we find out they real people, the next question is what are they doing hanging around in them woods!"

"Yeah," said Anna Lee. "They'll have some explaining to do."

Clara looked toward the woods. "Could be some dangerous escaped convicts living down in there!"

Dolly whined, "We could get killed. I'm scared!" She sat ringing her hands and making fake crying sounds and glancing down at the woods. "We'll git down in them woods and nobody'll ever see poor little us again!"

We got to our feet and stood staring down at the woods. We all were afraid. But it was something we had to do.

A big black crow swooped down in the tree over our heads and sat cawing and cawing and cawing. Was it an omen of some sort? We looked at one another.

Just as we'd thought, Aunt Rainbow was glad

that we wanted to go visit Aunt Ella. She rushed off to the pantry and came back shining up a jar of huckleberry preserves with her apron, and handed it to Anna Lee. After we changed clothes she followed us out on the porch.

"Y'all tell Aunt Ella I hope she feels better. Tell her I'm coming over there to see her the first chance I get." She looked at us. "You young'uns get back here 'fo dark, now."

After we got out of Aunt Rainbow's sight, we armed ourselves with big rocks and big fat sticks. We braced ourselves and headed for the woods. As we trudged along the dusty path, our eyes were set dead ahead.

The sun was still high, but just as we entered the mouth of the woods, a mass of clouds covered it and the dapples of sunlight lying across our path disappeared, making the woods even darker.

We moved on, our hearts in our throats, willing ourselves to keep moving forward no matter what. As we moved along in a tight clump, my trembling knees were making me do a little dance. Anna Lee had put the jar of preserves under one arm to free both hands to do battle. We held our weapons ready, our eyes darting front, back, and sideways. As we moved close to the place on the path where we had seen the two people before, the deep green forest on both sides of us seemed deathly still. The only sound was our feet stumbling through the overgrown path, the tall weeds

slapping the legs of our jeans. We could hear our own hearts, thumping wildly in our throats.

"Look!" I cried out. Two people had sidled from the thicket of the woods onto the path. We stopped dead in our tracks! "Oooooooooowwww," cried Dolly, and for a brief moment we all trembled. Then we began to will ourselves to move on, whispering to one another, "Come on! Don't run! Keep walking! Let's walk right on up to 'em!"

The couple stood ghostlike on the path. Gripping our rocks and sticks, we pressed on. They stepped a few feet toward us, bracing themselves as if they were using every ounce of willpower they owned to force us back. We kept coming. Suddenly there was no doubt in our minds that these were real flesh and blood people. They stood stiffly on our path, staring straight at us. They were gray-headed, and the man wore old faded overalls and the lady a long dress. But there was something strange looking about them. Their faces looked young.

Suddenly we were revitalized. It must have been the anger and frustration that we had suffered, ruining practically all of our summer, that made us revolt. All of a sudden we charged them, daring them to stand there till we got to them. We hated them! They had tormented us long enough.

Just as we got close to them, they realized that we had no intention of turning back, and they

turned and ran back through the woods, their heads bent forward, their arms shielding their faces from the tree branches. We stood there staring at the back of their heads disappearing through the thicket.

Anna Lee took off behind them. "Oh, you ain't getting away from us!" she yelled through the woods. "Who are you? Who are you, I said?" We took out behind Anna Lee, warning her to come back. She kept fighting the thicket, hot on the man and woman's trail. We caught up to her and continued following them. Before we knew it we were deep into the woods. Through the thicket we saw a clearing with three tentlike houses, and some people standing around. Just as we stopped dead in our tracks, peeping at this setup through the trees, we heard *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

Somebody was shooting at us! We turned on our heels and scrambled back to the path. We didn't know whether to run back home or keep going. A shotgun blast from behind us decided us. We turned and ran down the path toward the other side of the woods.

We ran wildly, until we had no breath left and had to stop. We stood there holding our sides, our mouths hanging open and gasping for breath, unable to speak, looking back to see if we were being followed.

No one was behind us. But we took off again.

We had to keep moving. Then at last we looked and saw brightness pouring in, and it gave us added strength and we ran and stumbled into the bright sunlight.

There sat Mr. Strickland's little white general store; it looked like an angel, sitting there so peaceful and serene, not knowing the turmoil we were in. We jumped the ditch behind the store, climbed up the red dirt bank on our hands and knees, and ran around the side of the store to the front yard. There by the gas pump sat Mr. WD's old black pickup truck.

"Pa's in there!" cried Dolly.

"Thank God!" we said, slowing our pace as we approached the front door. There would be other people in the store besides Uncle Nedro and we had to compose ourselves and not sound like blubbering idiots.

Anna Lee pulled open the screen door and we walked into the dark and cool store behind her. All eyes flew to us. How haggard and frightened we must have looked to them!

"What in God's name happened to y'all!" said Uncle John, his mouth open in surprise and curiosity. Uncle Nedro and Ned and Wilson were staring at us with questioning eyes. Mr. WD had stopped talking, his Coca-Cola poised in mid-air. Mr. Strickland, the owner of the store, was stooping behind the counter doing something when we

walked in. Hearing Uncle John's startled tone of voice to us, Mr. Strickland straightened up from behind the counter, his eyes wide.

"We got to tell you something, Uncle John," gasped Anna Lee.

"Well, what is it?"

Anna Lee let her eyes move over the faces of the three white men sitting on nail kegs and stools, and then Mr. Strickland's face; she didn't know if it was safe to reveal our crucial information to everyone.

"Well, go on!" coaxed Uncle John. "What is it?"

Anna Lee told Uncle John everything, the three of us jumping in to help and all of us talking frantically at the same time. When we finished the store was in silence.

Mr. Strickland's green eyes peered unblinking across the store to the window facing those woods. He began to pace impatiently behind the counter. "You know, there's been a lot of moonshine flowing around in these parts for the past two or three years. Sheriff and his deputies have busted up quite a few rings. But the sheriff knowed there must be a *big* operation going on somewhere 'round here. They been looking for it!" He looked at Uncle John. "John, it's possible it's been going on right down there practically under your nose! Ain't that something?"

Standing with his hands draped on his hips and staring at the floor in awe, Uncle John said, "Do

you know what this all means?" He met Mr. Strickland's gaze. Then he turned and addressed us all, "Do you know what this means? It means if that's true the legend of Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts is over!" He snatched his old felt hat off his head and slammed it against the floor.

Mr. Strickland headed for the telephone. "I'll call the sheriff!"

Everyone was on their feet and standing about the store discussing the situation. Uncle Nedro came up to us.

"You poor young'uns," he said, tears glistening in his eyes. "You could of been killed down there in them woods today!"

Uncle John suddenly stopped talking to Mr. WD and rushed over to us. "Don't you young'uns ever do a dern fool thing like that again!" He looked from face to face. "Y'all all right?"

"Yesser," I said.

His face softened. "Things gonna be different now. Things gonna be like they used to be. You young'uns can stop worrying 'bout ghosts and be happy together and enjoy your summer like you used to."

Everybody in the store congratulated us for what we had done. We four poor innocent girls had confronted people with guns and survived.

With sympathy in their eyes and voices, Ned and Wilson bought us cold bottled drinks and stood watching us drink them. We leaned against

the counter letting the sweet, ice-cold liquid refresh our parched throats. We were heroes.

Mr. Strickland appeared from the back of the store. "Sheriff'll be here in a few minutes. Wants to talk to the girls."

Uncle John and Uncle Nedro rushed to our side.

"Don't y'all be scared," Uncle John said. "Just tell the sheriff what happened."

We kept peeping nervously out the screen door for the sheriff's car.

Anna Lee slapped her hand to her throat and whispered to us, "I'm so scared my knees is knocking."

"Mine ain't never *stopped* knocking," I said.

Clara said, "Can't nothing be as bad as when we heard them shotgun blasts back there. If we went through that, we can go through a little questioning from the sheriff."

Dolly said, "Ooooh, s'pose we git put in jail!"

Uncle John and Uncle Nedro stood near us at the door, nervously waiting for the sheriff. They were so deeply relieved that this *ghost* thing was over they were overjoyed, as we all were.

"Here he comes!" said Uncle John, and we looked down the winding red dirt road and saw the sheriff car coming bounding over the ruts up toward the store, red dust billowing in the air behind it.

We four stared at the sheriff when he walked

in, his badge glittering. He took us aside and we bravely told him everything, from beginning to end.

After we finished our story, he turned and without another word went to the telephone and summoned his deputies at headquarters. A few minutes later the sheriff sped away, and we four climbed on the back of Mr. WD's pickup with Ned and Wilson. Uncle John and the rest got into the cab, and we headed home.

"Sheriff and his deputies going down in them woods and see what's there!" yelled Ned against the wind lashing his face and tousling his hair.

"Yeah," said Wilson, holding on to his old felt hat, "might be a lot of shooting down there. Somebody might get killed!"

I looked around at the girls. "I'm glad we don't have to go back through those woods!"

Clara said, "I can't believe we did what we did!" The wind was ballooning her white blouse and carrying her voice away from us. We sat two on each side of the truck bed with our backs up against the sides, our legs stretched out.

Anna Lee reached up and smoothed her hair back. She looked around at Ned. "Ned, do you s'pose the sheriff and them will park their cars down there at the woods from our house?"

"Yeah," said Ned. "That's sho where they gonna be when we get there. Sheriff called his

deputies from the store and told them everything. They'll probably all be down there when we get home."

"Oh, boy!" I said. "I want to see this!"

"Me, too," said Dolly. "I hope we see 'em bring out them two folks that's been scaring the daylight out of us. I hope they throw them in the jail!"

"Me, too!" the rest of us said.

Mr. WD's old pickup truck spluttered and groaned as we went down the highway. We were all on our knees in the truck and leaning around the cab to stare down at the woods as we came across the field. There sat five deputy-sheriff cars lined up along the edge of the woods near the entrance to the path we had traveled earlier. Just as Mr. WD came to a stop under a big tree where the path forked, we heard *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Shots were ringing out all through those woods, it seemed!

Uncle John and Uncle Nedro jumped from the truck and we jumped down and joined them. We stood staring saucer-eyed down at the woods. We looked and saw Aunt Rainbow coming trotting down the path toward us.

"*What* is going on down there!" she said, panting as she joined us.

Uncle John explained to her what was going on, and he turned and warned us all that we should

go on to the house lest we get hit with a stray bullet. We piled on the pickup, rode on home, and watched through the front door.

It wasn't long before the shooting stopped, and we thought it was safe to go out on the porch. We didn't stop at the porch; we ran up the path for a better view of the woods. Just as we got up the incline, we looked down toward the woods and saw the sheriff and his deputies leading people from the woods with their hands cuffed behind them.

After they had been hauled off in the sheriff's cars, we looked and saw the sheriff driving slowly up the hill toward where we were standing under the big shade tree. He stopped the car on the side of the path and got out and came over to us.

"We just busted up one of the biggest liquor stills we've seen 'round here in a long time!" he said, his face red and sweaty. He took off his hat and smoothed back his brown hair over his milky white forehead.

The whole operation had been run by Mr. Samuel HeyJohnny, who owned the woods. Everybody thought he was living up North but instead he was living in a trailer deep in the woods, running his booming whiskey business.

The sheriff said after the Batts place burned down and no one had found the bodies, the rumor had got out about the land being haunted. Every-

one believed it was true and began staying clear of the land — all this had given Mr. HeyJohnny an idea.

About three years ago he'd set up a liquor still operation down there and hired two people to act as the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts. Every time somebody came near the woods those two people would appear as the Battses' ghosts. And it had worked all this time, leaving Mr. HeyJohnny and his men to operate their still unseen, until today!

We asked the sheriff about the two people acting as the Battses' ghosts. He said they were young people with old folks' clothes on and gray wigs.

After the sheriff finished talking to Uncle John he turned to us four and complimented us on our daring feat.

"You gals was mighty brave to do what you done," he said. "I know you've made your Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow mighty proud."

"Yesser. Thankee." We looked down at the ground, rubbing the toes of our shoes in the dirt.

After the sheriff car crawled on across the field toward the highway, we turned and headed down the path home, feeling a sense of peace and serenity that we had not felt since Uncle John had moved into the new house.

Up ahead of us it seemed as if we were seeing Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow's beautiful little home for the very first time.

When we got to the house we all went and sat on the front porch still talking about what had happened. Uncle John plodded out to the little white picket fence enclosing the square of green carpeted grass fronting the house, and he began to pluck the dying brown roses from among the flourishing bright red ones. It was a happy moment for him.

I watched him with interest. For maybe the very first time he could enjoy his new home and land without the agony of it being haunted ground hanging like a dark and gloomy cloud over his head. He moved jubilantly along the fence, his back bent, ridding the roses of their debris, their rubbish; the same as the sheriff and his deputies had rid us four girls of our fears and anxieties.

At last Uncle John stood, pressing the palms of his hands against his tired back, looking thoughtfully at the house. He must have been thinking of the Saturdays and Sundays to come when his porch and backyard would be milling with visitors again. When out under the big oak tree on Saturday mornings Ned would have the neighboring friends and relatives lined up, chattering and telling tales and jokes, waiting for their turn under Ned's skilled hands for their haircut. He must have been thinking of how the joke was on the people that had so adamantly teased him about building on, and starting a new life on, haunted ground. Yes, yes, the joke was on them, for just

look at that beautiful little white house. Come next spring this piece of land would be a picture in a magazine, with the snowy dogwoods and red bud trees, and flowering pink crabapple.

After we had exhausted the subject of all that had happened, everyone went inside — except us four. We were not through with the jubilation.

The sun was down now as we sat on the porch listening to the crickets begin their serenade and watched the lightning bugs begin their fluttering through the gray twilight of the evening.

Once again I felt the joy of belonging, that each summer, after school was out in Raleigh, impelled me to come down to Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow's little farmhouse.

Anna Lee and Clara were swinging in the swing, Dolly and I sitting in the chairs. Aunt Rainbow must have known we wanted this time together alone to savor our newfound peace of mind, for she had not called us into the kitchen to help her with supper, and we could smell the delicious aroma of cooking through the front door onto the porch.

"Let's go catch some lightning bugs!" cried Anna Lee, jumping to her feet and hurrying across the porch and down the steps. We jumped up and followed her out in the yard where we began to act like ten-year-olds chasing lightning bugs across the yard, laughing and giggling and acting silly. After that we went and sat on the

front porch steps and sang in perfect harmony.

As we sang I glanced down at that vast forest that only a few hours ago loomed mysterious and threatening. Now the trees looked as if they were rejoicing with us.

Aunt Rainbow suddenly called through the screen door: "You young'uns come on in to supper."

10

In two weeks it would be September, and we four would go our separate ways. We aimed to milk those next two weeks of every drop of fun possible, including going to Hazel's party that coming Saturday — only three days away — to see our favorite singing group, The Sugar Drippers.

It was around noon that Wednesday at the tobacco scaffold when we caught up on the work and we girls and Johnny Mae ran to our favorite spot under the lean-to shelter to talk private.

We were discussing Hazel's next party. Johnny Mae had just said, "Since Uncle John's in such a happy mood, he might let y'all go to the party."

Anna Lee said, "He ain't that happy, honey!"

Johnny Mae hunched her shoulders. "Well, if he won't let you go . . . serves him right if you have to lie to him."

"Sho do," said Clara. "'Cause we deserve to go.

We the ones solved the mystery of the Battses' ghosts!"

I said, "Why I'll bet you in no time people will be using that path through those woods like crazy."

"They will," said Anna Lee. "It's the only short-cut to back over 'bout Hazel's and Aunt Ella's and Mr. Strickland's store and all. People won't have to go way 'round the other way to get there."

All five of us were kicking our feet back and forth as we sat on the high ledge eating lemon Moon Pies and looking out across the barnyard hoping we wouldn't see a truckload of tobacco coming.

Johnny Mae said, "I just had an idea!" Her eyes were wide with excitement.

"What?" we chorused.

"It's almost the end of the barning season, and y'all know Uncle John always has a big barbecue. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Hazel and Uncle John could have a big party *together* at Uncle John's place?"

We stared at her. "You mean . . . the Sugar Drippers come to *our* house . . . !" Anna Lee cried, her mouth open, her eyes wide.

"Dern tooting! Why not!" said Johnny Mae. We all fell into hysteria. "Oh, my heavens! The Sugar Drippers at our own house!" cried Dolly.

Clara jumped down from the ledge and did a

little dance round in a circle. Dolly and I jumped down and joined hands and began sashaying about in a circle.

Anna Lee said, "Y'all stop getting so happy. Uncle John ain't gonna do nothing like that."

"You don't know," said Johnny Mae. "He might. Y'all know how much Uncle John misses people coming to his house. If he have a big party over there and invite everybody it'll surely put an end to everybody's hesitation to visit." She looked at us though the corner of her eye. "I'll tell Hazel. Y'all just wait. Hazel 'll persuade him."

Anna Lee thought about it for a minute, kicking her feet and staring at the ground. "One way or the other, we going to that party!"

We looked and saw the truck coming and jumped down.

"Let's hurry and get this truck out before dinner so we can have some free time," said Anna Lee.

We were heading across the field, we ladies sitting in the wagon with our legs stretched out, the men sitting on the back end of the wagon with their legs swinging.

Uncle John was happier than I had ever seen him. He was talking to Uncle Nedro and Wilson about something, when he suddenly turned to us girls.

"I got a little surprise for you young'uns," he

said above the noise of the wagon clacking along the dusty path.

We stared at him. Could it be what we thought?

"I thought I'd let y'all have a little party at the end of the season this year. Invite who you want to."

We wondered if we had heard him correctly.

Aunt Rainbow was sitting on the end next to Uncle John. She craned her neck over the side of the wagon and spit a neat little spittle of snuff across the path. "Y'all can bring the record player out on the porch and play records, and we can bake up some cakes and pies, and make a tub of grape punch, and all. . . ." She looked at us. "It was supposed to be a surprise!" she said, eyeing Uncle John who hadn't been able to keep the secret.

"Thank you, Aunt Rainbow! Thank you, Uncle John!" we chorused.

While Aunt Rainbow was talking to Uncle John, Anna Lee whispered in my ear, "We ain't gonna need no record player on the front porch. We gonna have the Sugar Drippers!"

11

And Sugar Drippers it was! There would be a gigantic party right there in Uncle John and Aunt Rainbow's front yard, Hazel's big party featuring the Sugar Drippers, combined with Uncle John's yearly end-of-barning-season barbecue. Except Uncle John was having his a week early. We don't know how Hazel got Uncle John to move his barbecue up a week to combine with hers; it must have been like getting blood from a turnip. But she had succeeded.

We girls had Johnny Mae to thank. She had prodded Hazel into doing it. She had pointed out to Hazel that if she had her party along with Uncle John's she would not only have the young party-goers paying a fee but also older people as paying guests.

Some said Hazel had promised Uncle John a small share of the profits. We girls were ecstatic. We were moving about in a daze as we helped

make preparations for this gigantic party, which would be as different from Uncle John's usual little end-of-season party as a mosquito is from a jet plane! We had written our boyfriends letters of invitation. Every single friend and relative for miles around was asked — everybody would be there!

Uncle John and Uncle Nedro and Wilson and Ned would barbecue two of Uncle John's young and tender pigs, and they got busy right away digging pits in the backyard. They would sit up all night watching the roasting pigs, Uncle John dabbing on his secret homemade barbecue sauce.

Every guest was required to bring a covered dish and a dessert and whatever else they wished to contribute to the big affair. We girls got in the kitchen with Aunt Rainbow and baked cakes and pies and made sweet-potato jacks and long pans of peach and huckleberry cobbler.

No matter how much we willed ourselves to keep our cool, we knew that the minute we looked up and saw the Sugar Drippers coming we would die a natural death.

The Saturday morning of the barbecue we sprang out of bed without Aunt Rainbow having to pound on the door. It was still dark outside, yet Uncle John and the other men were already

bustling about, hauling up sawhorses from the barns and lean-to shelters there in the backyard. They would line them up and lay boards across them for the dinner table out under the shade trees. Meanwhile we four and Aunt Rainbow were in the kitchen making last-minute preparations. We worked silently and breathlessly around Aunt Rainbow as we made huge bowls of potato salad and coleslaw and large pans of cornbread for the pork barbecue that had been taken from the grills, chopped to perfection and seasoned once again with Uncle John's secret sauce.

The minute Aunt Rainbow left the kitchen we girls changed from quiet, busy little bees to bursting out and singing under our breath lines from the latest recording of the Sugar Drippers. We'd hear Aunt Rainbow's footsteps and fall silent again.

Once when Aunt Rainbow was out of the kitchen, Ned came in and got a drink of water from the water bucket. We were standing in a group with our necks craned forward, eyes closed, singing our favorite Sugar Drippers song, swaying to our own rhythm. While Ned drank from the long-handled dipper, his eyes were on us. And when he finished he gave us a long look out of the corner of his eye, as if he thought we were over-enthusiastic about the Sugar Drippers. He turned to leave and as he walked through the door he

began snapping his fingers and bopping. We laughed.

We finished everything, and were told to clean up the kitchen. Aunt Rainbow, who had a passion for cold Pepsi-Colas, got one from the refrigerator and went out on the front porch to catch her breath. This gave us time to talk.

Anna Lee said, "Y'all reckon our boyfriends will come?"

Clara threw her nose in the air. "What boyfriends?" At that moment the Sugar Drippers were our boyfriends. We owned a large glossy photograph of them, with their names written under their picture. There was Bill Angelo, the lead singer, tall and with a silky voice that could melt your heart. All of us claimed him as our boyfriend. Then there were the other three that sang with him; a short one with a deep growling voice; one with the most perfect set of pearly white teeth, and the third one who was medium tall and had dreamy-looking eyes. And there were four more handsome band members. If for some reason we couldn't have Billy . . . any of the others would do.

Clara patted the back of her hair and lifted her eyebrows. "When Billy sees little ole me, you little ole ugly gals won't stand a chance!"

Anna Lee's eyes burned through Clara. She propped her hands on her hips and wiggled herself

at Clara. "Honey child, when Billy sees that ugly mug of yours he's liable to go tearing back across that field screaming and telling everybody he just saw a bear." We laughed. She continued, her nose in the air. "But when he sees me he'll tell everybody there's a princess living over here. He'll say I'm the most gorgeous thing he's ever laid eyes on!"

"Humph!" said Dolly to Anna Lee. "You and Clara both better go on in yonder and start fixing your faces if you want to look good as me and Grace!" She looked at me. "Right, Grace?" She threw out her palm and I slapped it.

I said, "Good-looking folks don't brag about their looks!" I threw out my palm and Dolly slapped it.

Out under the shade of the big oak tree sat the sawhorses with stout boards placed across them, and the long, long table resembled a giant centipede.

Aunt Rainbow searched the house for her whitest old sheets and handed them to us, and we pressed them and ran out and spread them across the boards and stood back to admire the table.

The day was overcast, a cool breeze in the air. It was a perfect day for our big affair. We stood watching the long white tablecloth gently fluttering in the breeze, our hearts pounding with excitement. Then we ran inside and styled our hair

and slipped on our prettiest dresses and applied our makeup.

By two o'clock the front yard and the field leading up to the house were crowded with cars and trucks and mule-drawn wagons. The women and girls had hauled their country-cured baked and glazed hams, barbecued ribs, fried chicken, and every other meat dish you could mention up to the table. The ladies had outdone themselves with their chocolate, coconut, pineapple, and caramel cakes, all heavy with rich country butter. And every woman there had brought along everyone's favorite boiled greens seasoned to perfection, collards, cabbages, squash, mustard greens — which no one would touch without cornbread to go along with them.

The table sat laden with every kind of food one could mention, including everyone's favorite, pickled peaches and watermelon-rind pickle. People milled about the yard chattering and visiting and saying things to Uncle John like, "I sho didn't know your place over here was this pretty, John. Lord knows I didn't." "Yeah," said another, "thank God all that mess about ghosts and this land being haunted is over! With everybody over here today and everything so cheerful and happy, so many people be coming visiting now that you'll get tired of 'em!"

Our boyfriends arrived, all wearing white buck-

skin shoes, their nicest dress shirts and pants, their hair slicked back. We met with them and stood talking, but our hearts and souls were on *you-know-who*.

Hazel would lead the Sugar Drippers to our house. It was three o'clock now and no Hazel and no Sugar Drippers. We began to get worried, praying under our breath. *Please God, please let them come!* We left our boyfriends and were standing in a little clump whispering to one another. What a disaster it would be if the Sugar Drippers didn't show up! We glanced around at the teenagers and other ardent fans, eagerly awaiting the singers, their eyes lingering up the path for a glimpse of them.

"Yonder they come!" cried a teenage boy, and we looked and saw Hazel's black Chevrolet creeping over the rutted clay path across the field. A long black shiny Cadillac trailed it. Behind that was a black panel truck, and trailing that was another fancy car. It was the Sugar Drippers and their entourage!

A wave of cheers rose from the crowd, and we four standing close together squeezed each other's fingers to the bone. It was actually happening! For the first time we knew for certain the Sugar Drippers were coming to our house.

The black Cadillac drove up behind Hazel's car and stopped. A hush fell over the yard. The four

Sugar Drippers singers stepped from the car and the crowd went wild, the boys whistling and the girls shrieking. Dressed in blue-silk outfits, their hair piled in wavy pompadours over their bronze foreheads, they nodded and smiled as they merged into the crowd. The car carrying the members of the band stopped and they got out and joined Billy Angelo and the other singers who were busy signing autographs, the fans surrounding them like flies on sugar. The panel truck carrying the musical instruments and the materials for the makeshift stage drove farther across the yard to the shade and stopped.

We four moved about the yard in a tight little cluster, our hearts pumping wildly, our boyfriends forgotten, trying to muster enough courage to go up to the Sugar Drippers and say all the things we had boasted to one another we would say, like how much we adored them and that we owned every record they had made. But most of all now, we wanted the Sugar Drippers to know that we were not just any old regular fans in the crowd; we were the four girls whose yard they were standing in; weren't we just a little bit more special?

We watched the other girls crowding around and trying to possess what was rightly ours, until we got mad. Then we pushed our way through the crowd and literally shoved the girls crowded

around the Sugar Drippers out of our way and introduced ourselves.

Bill Angelo said we were the prettiest girls at the party, and we nearly fainted. Standing looking him in the eye and realizing that here was our heartthrob standing close enough to touch, the same one that we had beat and slapped our old dome-shaped radio so many times for, trying to get his wonderful voice to cut through the static, was overwhelming. The rest of Billy's entourage learned that we were the girls who lived here, and they began to pay us special attention, asking us questions, until it became obvious from the expressions on their faces that the other girls were burning with jealousy.

Then came the feast.

The long table was uncovered and everybody lined up and Reverend Edwards said the blessing. Then everybody piled their plates to overflowing.

Then when the feast was about over, after everybody had eaten until there was no room left in their stomach, and had tried to sample every dessert on the table, the band began tuning their instruments. The sharp twang of an electric guitar, the shrill notes of a clarinet, the jubilant rattle of a drum cut through the chatter and lifted over the field to the silent woods.

A platform had been erected under the shade trees and draped in purple crushed velvet, as

professional-looking as if it were the stage at the Memorial Auditorium in Raleigh where the Sugar Drippers had performed. The band was in position: the four singers were front center stage, in a line, motionless, waiting for the music to strike up. The crowd in the yard stood so silent that the faraway bark of a dog was heard.

Suddenly the music struck up, ringing loud and vibrant through the big speakers, and the Sugar Drippers began turning and spinning and kicking their legs in rhythm and swaying their heads and gliding their hands through the air. Billy Angelo stepped forward, the other three still dancing in rhythm behind him, and began singing into the microphone, while he kept dancing in step with the others. The crowd went wild, clapping to the music. We four standing together turned and looked at one another, and forgetting everything else, not caring who was watching, we fell into singing along with the Sugar Drippers at the tops of our voices, as we often did whenever we heard them on the radio. It was a feeling you could not explain, and one we would never ever forget.

They sang fast songs and slow songs, for fast dancing and slow-dragging, couples spinning and twirling all over the white clay yard, and holding each other close while slow-dragging. Aunt Twila stood it as long as she could, trying to maintain her dignity, but when she could stand the arousing

music no longer she lifted the hem of her dress above her knees and fell into doing the Charleston, her bowlegs cutting across each other, everyone laughing and cheering her on.

We four slow-dragged with our boyfriends, being careful not to let them hold us too close. But when the fast music came we turned and grabbed each other and began our spinning and twirling, Anna Lee and Clara, and Dolly and me, that we had perfected at home.

The Sugar Drippers saved their latest, top-of-the-charts song for last. And when Billy Angelo walked up to the microphone and sang the first few notes of the song, the girls screamed and the boys laid a finger at the corner of their lips and whistled long, sharp whistles.

The late evening sun was a ball of brilliant red fire sinking behind the tall North Carolina pines behind Uncle John's house when the Sugar Drippers and their entourage packed up their make-shift stage and instruments and headed back across the field.

The crowd lingered, going back to the table for second and third or fourth helpings, laughing and talking and just enjoying being together like this. And as if we hadn't had enough music, a group of guitar players, led by Johnny Mae, the champion picker, gathered on the end of the front porch and tried to outpick one another.

It was dusk, the crickets drowning, the light-

ning bugs winking across the yard, and some families were still here. The young children were out in the yard playing, their trill voices floating up on the porch where we four sat winding down from the excitement of it all, the porch empty except for us.

The perfect day was over.

12

It was Saturday evening, our last evening together. Tomorrow Mama and Daddy and our three brothers would come and get me and Clara and take us back to Raleigh, where school would soon start.

Uncle John's place was very popular now. Taking the shortcut from the highway, past Uncle John's place, and on through those woods to the other side of Bird Song saved an awful lot of time, and now, after many years of reluctance to go near those haunted woods, people were parading through there as if they had never stopped. And people were stopping by Uncle John's house on their way through or back. There was someone constantly sitting under the big oak tree talking to Uncle John or some lady sitting on the porch chatting with Aunt Rainbow.

The appearance of the Sugar Drippers on his property was almost more than the people could

comprehend, and they looked on Uncle John now as a prominent person.

Uncle John loved it. He had changed from a humble property owner to one of great enthusiasm. He even talked of buying more land from Mr. Haynes, whose acres surrounded Uncle John's property in vast amounts.

We girls were sitting at the big pond in back of Uncle John's house. We felt as sad as the two tall willows on either side of the pond, weeping their low branches into the gray water.

I reached down on the bank and dug a small stone from the soft dark earth and skipped it across the pond.

"I hate school," I said. "I wish I didn't have to go back." I stared at the ground. "But I know you have to go to school if you want to make something of your life — be somebody in this world."

"Sho do," said Anna Lee. "I'm gonna be a school-teacher, myself."

"I'm gonna be a doctor," said Dolly.

We waited for Clara, and when she didn't say anything, I said, "Well, I'm gonna be a famous writer of Southern novels. I'm gonna write a famous novel about ghosts."

Anna Lee gave me a long look, a quizzical frown on her forehead. But she didn't say anything.

Dolly laid a hand on my shoulder and bent and playfully looked me straight in the eye. "What you gonna put in there 'bout me?"

I said, "Oh, I don't know. Y'all will see it when it comes out on the bookshelves in the store."

I looked at my two cousins and thought how much I cherished coming to Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John's house each summer. The work was hard, but I loved the close-knit, familylike situation we lived in, working from sunup till sundown. Here I felt safe and secure, at peace in the slow-moving, unintimidating country world around me. The country South. I loved it with a passion.

"Grace! Grace!" Anna Lee snapped me from my reverie. "You got a bite! You got a bite!"

I glanced out at the little brown cork at the end of my fishing pole that had been snatched under the surface of the water and was being rapidly dragged along. I jumped to my feet and pulled back on the fishing pole with all my might. It felt as if there was something as big as a whale at the end of my line, fighting and pulling on the hook to free itself. Anna Lee and Clara and Dolly all jumped and ran over to help. As they shouted advice to me I fought with the big thing, pulling and pulling and pulling until I got it close enough to fling onto the bank. I gave one hard upward pull and flung the line back over my shoulder and Clara screamed as the black eel dangling from the line wrapped itself around her neck like a black snake. Clara stood stomping and screaming and shouting bloody murder as we tried to untangle

the eel and line from her body, the eel flopping wildly.

We hadn't had time to laugh, we were so busy trying to free Clara, but when it was all over Anna Lee and Dolly and I bent double with laughter, Clara standing rolling her eyes at me, refusing to laugh.

"I'm sorry, Clara," I said, tears in my eyes from laughing so hard. Anna Lee and Dolly were struggling to hold back their laughter as I begged Clara's pardon. Clara could hold it no longer and she burst out laughing, and all four of us howled.

Where the green apples grow
Where the grass grows so sweet . . .
Your true love is dead
He wrote you a letter
So turn back your head
Where the green apples grow
Where the grass grows so sweet . . .

About the Author

I was born in Nash County, North Carolina, and grew up among a host of relatives, many of whom were great storytellers.

I myself have a passion for writing about the country South, about childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood — in other words, about growing up in the South.

Through my writings of those days and times, I have learned to respect my past, to respect my own heritage and myself.

Haunted Woods takes place not too far from where I grew up. My sister, Dorothy, and two close, sisterlike cousins of ours, Glenn and Doris, and I inspired the characters. Dorothy is Clara, Glenn is Anna Lee, Doris is Dolly, and I am Grace.

Haunted Woods is my third published book. The others are a biography of Mary McLeod Bethune and a young adult novel, *The Listening Sky*.



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Every summer Grace and her sister, Clara, go to visit their cousins, and best friends, Anna Lee and Dolly Duley in North Carolina. But this summer is different. Because of the Duleys' new house, and because of the ghosts....

The whole town knows the legend of Mr. and Mrs. Batts. How their house burned down, and how they died in the fire. The girls' uncle John got the house for a great price, because *no one* wanted to live on haunted land.

Now, the four cousins have heard strange noises coming from the woods. And they've seen the Battses walking down the dark lane, surrounded by an eerie glow.

Everyone says there are no such things as ghosts, but if the Battses are alive, what are they doing hiding in the dark, scary woods?



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